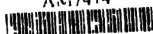


**SWEETHEARTS
UNMET**



BERTA RUCK

AN7414



DEDICATED

TO ALL THE LONELY ONES,

AND TO THREE LADS WHO WILL NEVER BE LONELY

(STEVE, STEUART, AND "SLIM"),

WITH BEST WISHES TO ALL OF THEM FROM BERTA RUCK.

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CHAPTER I

YOUNG LONELINESS

" Love, I am lonely !
Years are so long ! "

—*Song.*

THE GIRL'S STORY

" A SWEETHEART'S waiting somewhere for every soul alive ! " they say.

If only it were true ! All I say is, " If there is the sweetheart, why can't I meet him ? "

For, oh, I am so lonely, and the days do drag, and—would people think that I, Julia Parry, aged eighteen, was a horrid little thing to say all this ?

Isn't it natural to feel it ? Or *am* I a disgrace to my sex ? Anyhow, I only say it here. Never would I admit it anywhere else. At the office they think I'm a baby ignoramus just up from the country. At home—well, dear old Grannie never realises I've altered from the little girl of eight that I was when I came to her. When I get back from work, she still smiles at me over her spectacles and asks, " Have you had a happy day, dear ? "

(What's her idea, I wonder, of a " happy " day ?)

She pours out my tea, making it washy and tepid with milk, because " strong tea upsets young nerves." Then she says, " Dear, dear ! I've got my knitting in such a muddle. I wonder if you could pick up these stitches, Julia ? No, not now, my dear. Presently will do. Finish your tea. Have you got everything you want ? "

Everything I want ?

I feel inclined to cry : " Oh, Grannie, no," with-the-loud-pedal-down ! " I am just full of the biggest wish in the world for what I want ! Oh, if you knew how I am longing for a little bit of Romance in my life, for a love-story of my own, or for even a nice boy friend to talk to, to be chummy with, to go about with as other girls do."

Mercy ! How petrified Grannie would be if I were suddenly to blurt this out aloud, instead of keeping it bottled up inside my heart as I sit there looking like every other sensible, " well-brought up," lady-like young girl. To think that in all my life I've never had any young men to talk to, not even brothers ! It sounds impossible, but you'd know it was true if you'd seen the village where Grannie brought me up before we actually moved to London—where we didn't know a soul, except " young " Mr. Lewis, the head of my office. Grannie calls him that because she was at school with his mother. He is forty-eight, and not bad. I go to his office near Westminster every day from half-past nine to five, and I earn what seems an enormous lot of money to me : thirty-three shillings a week ! I have bought myself a quite 'twee little hat of violet velvet.

But what's a becoming hat when there's nobody to wear it for ?

One girl in our room is engaged. The other always laughs, " Engaged ? Me ? No fear ! Not until I've had a top-hole time first ! "

She gets taken out to dinner by a new young man four evenings a week ! I shouldn't want that. Just one boy chum of my very own that I could like better than anyone I'd seen ; that's what would be lovely !

And not these smart restaurants where the food was so wonderful it would frighten me, and where I'd have to wear a frock costing me my salary for three months! No, just to be together with a dear boy who thought I was the only girl in the world, and who would look like——

Yes; here comes a secret. *I have seen the exact kind of boy to look at that I would like.* This very morning he passed me in the street as I was walking to my bus. He was going towards Paddington. Very tall, with a face like a shy school-boy, and a silver badge in the button-hole of his overcoat, that looked as if it had been put away before the war and as if he'd grown broader since. A soft grey hat with a black band; blue eyes. As he passed me—no, of course he didn't stare. He wasn't that sort. He just looked straight at me once; as if he did rather like my hat.

Or am I imagining this?

He was just "a ship that passed," but I couldn't help liking that glimpse of his face; his expression was so frank and boyish and yet rather sad. As if he were going about *missing* something.

I wonder what?

I can't help wishing I knew him. (Or is this forward?)

How nice if he were some one to whom I could smile and nod as we passed! A tiny thing like that would make the whole day less dull for me. (Or am I ridiculous?) How jolly if I could stop and say, "Good morning, Mr. Silver-Badger" (whatever his real name is), "Grannie says you haven't been to see us for ages; won't you come in to-morrow, to Sunday supper?" And if he could say, "Oh, that's awfully

kind of Mrs. Parry. Do thank her, Miss Julia, and say I'd love to."

Sometimes I imagine he's lonely too.

Or am I absurd? Why, probably that Silver Badger has only too many places to go to in his free time; a jolly home of his own, a huge family of sisters and brothers, and *billions* of pretty girl friends to take out to dinner! Or else he goes to some frightfully gay club with a lot of amusing chums and enjoys himself like anything! I don't know what young men do exactly, but I'm sure this one has the most lovely time in the evening. As I sit here alone with Grannie, I do envy him. . . . Of course, *he's* never lonely!

THE BOY'S STORY

Funny how lonely some of us feel now there's no longer a war on!

At, of course, to think it's over, and that there's nothing more to worry about but settling down to "*human* life" and one's job. They very decently kept mine open for me in our department on the railway, so I've only got to take things up where I left them four years ago. I was just over seventeen then; only an inch shorter than I am now.

Those four years seem a dream. A dream made up of carrying on through lots of messy jobs, and of being beastly cold and muddy and tired lots of the time, but of laughing no end as well, and getting plenty of fun, off and on, with the rest of the crowd.

It's that crowd one misses.

But there's something I miss worse.

My pal. The fellow I used to do everything with. Just think of the chum I had! Went with him to school. Came up to town with him; had digs with

him in this house I live in now ; started work with him. On Sundays we'd a punt up the river. War came. I went with him into the infantry ; first stripe, second stripe together. Commissions together. Went into the R.F.C. Pilots together. Then I was wounded on the 29th. I didn't get any letters for three weeks. Came out of hospital and met some man, who said to me, " Hard lines, Harrison getting killed." Just casually like that, you know.

" Hard lines Harrison getting killed. . . ." The first I'd heard of it. I—— Why ! We'd been so pally it had sort of excluded everything else ; I'd never been real *friends* with anybody but him, and there he was : gone !

I didn't know where to turn.

Absolutely it did me in. I haven't known what to do with myself since. Fellows at the office are decent enough, but I can't talk to any of those as I could to him. Nobody'd understand if one tried to explain how absolutely lonely a demobbed chap like me can feel nowadays. No real chum of his age ~~any more~~. No proper home. Nowhere particular to go after work. And——

Here's what would make people laugh if they knew, so of course one's mum about it—no girl to see.

It's a fact that I don't know any girls.

While I was at school I lived with an old uncle who never wanted any girl about his house. Then up here, there was always my pal. For the river and the theatres we were together ; didn't want anything more. Almost as soon as we joined up we were sent out and up the line.

Girls have simply not come into my life. I don't know if there are many fellows of twenty like me, or if I'm just an exception and a freak ?

Fellows at the office—why, they've shoals of girl friends. Question is, how to keep track of 'em. Where they get to know them all is a puzzle to me. I asked one of them, "Slim" Grantham, a decent chap, I ran into him at the Coliseum with an awfully handsome girl, and he told me afterwards he'd never seen her before that day. She was working on our telephone exchange, and he'd been wangling little chats with her every day.

"You can do a lot with a voice, Smith, you know," says this chap to me, laughing. "Or, for the matter of that, what's a girl given a pair of eyes for?"

I laughed too; didn't want him to put me down as an absolute dud. But—I suppose I've got faddy and cranky since my wound? P'raps those bits of "Archie" left sticking about my nut, make me different from other chaps? For I just don't feel I want to get to know a girl that way.

Not by telling her the tale over the telephone; not by giving her the glad eye in the street. It may be idiotic of me. Can't help it. That sort of thing puts me dead off. What I'd like would be to get myself introduced (deadly old-fash., isn't it?) to some nice girl; to go to her home, see her with her mater and her little sisters and that sort of touch. (I told you I was a freak.) I'd like it to be on the square from the start.

So there's the problem.

I don't want to get to know any girl who isn't what they call "particular." And a very "particular" girl isn't the sort I can get to know!

You needn't imagine that I'm superior and don't care; if you knew how I was longing for a sweetheart of my own! Why, I think it would be the most

wonderful thing ever. A topping friendship like I had with Tim Harrison ; some one I could tell things to, and yet, on the top of it, so much more. I—here's something else I could never tell anyone—I make up dreams about that girl I'd like, that perfect playmate of mine. I call her " Jill," because my name is Jack. Piffle, but nobody'll ever know. I even know what she's like to look at. Not too short because I've such long legs, and I'd want her to be able to swing along in step with me when we went for tramps on Saturday afternoons like I used to with Tim. Grey-blue eyes she'd have ; a curly bit of brown hair showing against her cheek, and a colour like a rose. She'd wear what girls always do look nicest in, I think—blue serge, quite simple ; and a dinky little funny purple hat, pulled well on to her head.

All this, of course, is my imagination-girl ; that is—well ! as a matter of fact I did, this morning, meet a girl a little like her. I mean I passed her in the street as one passes hundreds of girls a day, never to think of them again. I couldn't help noticing this one. In the middle of the drab pavements and hurrying crowd she looked as fresh as a pansy growing out of a mud-pie. That's the sort of girl I wish I could get to know. . . .

Every blessed morning now I pass her on my way to work. Funny how I look forward to that one glimpse of a girl who's never noticed me more than if I were a lamp-post in the road !

But—evenings. That's the time of the day when I realise that big shell-hole in my life ! .

To-night I got in, out of the pouring rain, at seven. The rooms aren't bad ; old Tim and I used to think them cosy. But to-night it all seemed gloomy. The

fire smoked; and it's rotten, feeding alone. I'd finished my fish and potatoes and rice-custard pudding by seven-twenty. At half-past seven Mrs. Wright, the old girl who keeps the house, came in to clear. She's a decent old body. Usually I keep her talking a few minutes about the weather and what's in the papers, just so as to hear a human voice in this dug-out. To-night, though, she started about how it was exactly five years ago to the day since poor young Mr. Harrison had turned up here about engaging the rooms. Couldn't stick it. Put a record on our old gramophone to stop her yarning about him. But I wasn't in the mood for tunes. Reminded me of one time in the trenches with a lot of our fellows all bellowing together:

"Hello, my dearie! I'm lonesome for you." So I grabbed it off and looked at the clock; astonished to see it wasn't eight o'clock yet.

I got the fire burning a bit better and sat down with a book. Desert-island story called *"All Awry,"* about some chap who gets washed ashore with a girl, lucky dog. . . . London is a desert-island to me, but without any sign of the girl.

Funny how that girl's face in the little purple hat kept getting between me and what I was trying to read. Jove, she is pretty. I wonder where she was spending the evening. Gets a jolly good time, I bet, a sweet-looking kid like that! Probably a waiting-list of fellows to take her to all the shows in town; go-ey chaps like Grantham.

Slim Grantham would soon get to know her. . . . How? He'd simply stare at her until she'd got to look back at him.

I couldn't do it. Not to that girl.

He'd pretend he'd met her.

But I'd feel such a cad. He'd speak.

Imposs. How could one ?

Yet—to think of the difference it might make in one's whole life if one could be natural and tell a nice girl what one meant ! Supposing one could say right out, " My name is Jack Smith, and I'm the loneliest fellow in town. I've got to introduce myself like this because there's nobody else to do it, and because I want to know you more than I can say. Can't you let me see something of you ? Mayn't I call on your people ? Couldn't we be friends ? "

Why is it impossible to handle the thing in this way ? Supposing I did——

I brooded and wool-gathered over this.

At half-past nine I went to bed because there was nothing better to do.

I didn't go to sleep, though, for hours. I felt desperate. I found myself making that mad plan. Why not say all that to her ? Why not risk it ? Chance it ?

Could I ? Should I be justified ?

* * * * *

Author's note. May I here add a word of my own to the words of this boy and this girl ?

I am trying to write their story because it is also the story of so many others. All over the world there are living to-day girls without sweethearts, young men who do not know the right girl. The pity of it ! All towns are full of them. Under the plane-trees of London they walk, lonely ; between chestnut avenues of Paris, and where the huge street-cars thunder through New York. Yes ; and in every

smaller town. Bradford, Glasgow, Carnarvon, Sydney. Everywhere !

You who are reading this—don't you see every day some of these solitary girls, these boys with the trench-mud still staining the old Burberry? Don't you notice their wistful faces in the street, the train or bus? Do you wonder what stories are behind them?

That is why I'm taking this one girl out of the lonely thousands, just one pretty, every-day "nice" young girl, such as you'd see sitting opposite to you in the tube. Let me tell you of her innocent and secret longing for love. She hardly recognises it as the feeling all girls must have; she asks herself, "Or am I the only one?"

That's why I take this lad, typical of a crowd of the demobilised young fighters that we see about nowadays. This one was born to make that girl happy; her mate. He is equally lonely; puzzled by the inconsistencies of our world; exclaiming boyishly, "Funny, all this!" You've seen him too, often. Hundreds of him. Each of the hundreds has a story! Different stories, but not so different from the one I write of this one couple.

This boy will tell you how things happened to him; this girl shall explain what went on in her own life at that moment. I want them to show you how Fate seemed determined to keep these two apart, as so many are kept apart, and how the struggle is waged by modern Love against the force of Convention.

These two, young Jack Smith and little Julia, are types. What is your answer to their problem?

In this chapter the young man sets the first question. Is he justified in speaking? What will be the girl's attitude, if he does speak?

CHAPTER II

THE FALSE START

LADY VISITOR AT WORKING GIRLS' CLUB : " I suppose you know, dear girls, that a young lady never speaks to a man until he's been introduced to her ? "

FACTORY HAND : " We knows it, Miss, and we feels sorry for yer ! "

—*Punch*.

THE BOY'S STORY

I CHANCED it.

Why on earth did I ever make such an ass of myself ?

I spoke to her.

Good Lord, when I think of it !

It was what happened. . . . All breakfast time I told myself " Nothing venture, nothing gain," and " Faint heart never won fair lady."

Jove, how I wanted to win, or, anyhow, to have a chance of winning that little fair lady of my morning's walk ! And not the ghost of a prospect, unless I made some sort of a start myself.

The question was—Did I mean to go on and on like this, lonely and down in the mouth and miserable, just working all day and moping all evening over a book in my rooms ? Go on meeting, morning after morning, the very girl who might mean everything to me, and just to let her pass ?

So near and yet so far ! So near that I know by heart now every curve of her, so near that I could touch the brown, silky curl that kisses her cheek ! So far that I don't even know her name or where she lives ! Without any hope of knowing, unless—

This seemed the only way.

"If she understands," thought I, "well and good. If she takes it amiss, well and bad! Anything is better than just nothing!"

Yes; at breakfast I'd got into the "Jack-Smith-my-lad-you're-for-it" mood.

Then in the street, when I saw that little purple hat of hers bobbing along towards me, about fifty yards away through the crowd. . . . Cold feet again! I thought, "Have the absolute neck to speak to her? Can't be done." On I walked. On she came. Nearer, nearer, till I could see the colour of her eyes. It's the kind that changes; more blue than grey they looked this morning, perhaps because the sun was shining brightly.

All of a sudden I unmade my mind that I'd made up about not having the neck to do this thing. I'd looked in her little face as she came up to me.

D'you know, it seemed to me (my mistake, of course!) that she did notice me, that she did recognise me as not only just something she passed every day like the motor-buses along that route, but as a fellow-creature who might be a friend. I was jolly wrong, as it turned out. But I did think I saw her cheeks go a deeper pink as I got near. I did think there was the ghost of something quivering about her mouth that might almost have grown into a smile if she'd let it.

"Here goes!" thought I. I opened my mouth to speak.

In that flash there went straight out of my head everything I'd planned to say; my name, and how I had to introduce myself because there was nobody else to do it, and how I thought the world of getting to know her, and mightn't we make friends? That

went. Instead, I heard myself bleating out in a voice that might have belonged to some other chap and a bit of a bounder at that—"Good morning!"

Not the way I meant to start at all.

And then—my hat, when I think of it I could kick myself to pieces. What happened was that. . . . Nothing happened.

She walked straight on as if she hadn't heard or seen me.

But she had.

She looked—no! Not even at me! A look just came down over her face like the icy blackness that comes over a smiling lake when you're out fishing in February and all of a sudden the sun goes in behind the clouds. I felt frozen, frozen stiff.

What kind of a rotten young cad had she taken me for?

Perhaps I had behaved like it. . . . She was justified in giving the look that means "I do not know you" to the young bounder who had accosted her in the street. Next thing, perhaps, she'd get the wind up about my trying to follow her! (Much she knew how I was feeling about it!)

Well, looking about as encouraging as a parapet bristling with bayonets, she hurried on her way, and I did on mine.

I wished I'd bitten my tongue out or had been struck dumb by shell-shock before I let myself in for this.

What must she have thought? . . . *Awful* . . .

THE GIRL'S STORY

D'you know what I am wishing to-day?

Why, that I could rub this morning out as if it were a child's sum done wrong on a slate.

A dreadful thing happened.

I had to be rude and unkind to one of our boys who fought for us for four years. Think of it ; our country would have been overrun by Huns, pushing British women into the gutter as they swanked along London streets, but for our boys who "held the line for you and me, and kept the Germans from the sea!" It was to one of our defenders that I was a perfect little pig . . . !

Or was I perfectly right ?

I wish I knew what to think.

It was that Silver Badge with the nice face . . .

This morning, as usual, I saw him coming along in that old overcoat and that soft grey hat, and I thought as I've often done, "I do wish we could just say 'Good morning'!"

Then, as he came near enough for me to see the little wound-scar on his face that looks like a rather deep cleft in the chin, I somehow knew that this time he was going to speak.

He seemed to jerk himself together ; he raised his hat and said, "Er—good morning" in the nicest shy voice.

Oh, how my heart gave a little jump of delight, seeming to clap its hands (if hearts have hands) and to call out, "Good morning, Mr. Silver-Badger! Good morning ; it is a lovely day, isn't it?"

But instead of answering a word I glared straight past the young man and walked on as if he were a bit of waste-paper.

I know Grannie would have been pleased. She would have said, "Quite right, Julia ; I am so glad that my little girl had no hesitation at all about it. Any girl who wished to show that she was a little lady

would have done just the same as you did ; walked straight on in a dignified manner and taken no notice of the man who had the impertinence to address her "Well done, dear !"

But it was no credit to me ! I did it because I couldn't help it. At that moment there came over my face a sort of gas-mask of an expression. Of its own accord, just naturally as our kitten's back goes up at the sight of the fox-terrier across the road ! Instinct, I suppose ? The kitten spits ! The nice girl puts on that look when she meets with any notice from strangers who have not been introduced.

Aren't girls told that they can show a man, without a single word spoken, when his attentions are unwelcome ? These unintroduced attentions (we are taught) mean that the man thinks lightly of the girl to whom he speaks. . . .

Oh, I should so have hated that Silver Badger to think that I wasn't " nice " !

But—if I could only explain to him, " Mr. Silver-Badger, it isn't that I think you meant to be disrespectful ! Down at the bottom of my heart I feel that it was all right. But a girl like me simply can't say and do what she wants to. She has to follow what's called convention. I suppose it's a very good thing. Anyhow, there must be some reason for it, or it wouldn't be so strong."

Then I'd tell him, " I think that you, with that little silver badge of yours, are quite as brave and wonderful as those knights in whole suits of silver armour who used to go about rescuing maidens in distress. Those maidens didn't have to wait for some one to introduce that knight before they could thank him. I do wish we lived then instead of now——"

Or would he think that unwomanly of me ?

Oh, if I only knew what he thought ! I can't get him out of my mind.

This evening, after I'd straightened out the tangle that dear old Grannie always does make of her knitting, I sat down to the novel I'd taken out of the subscription library close by, hoping it would make me forget.

"Don't try your eyes, dear," said Grannie.

"No, Grannie. It's quite big print."

"What is it about, dear ?"

"Oh . . . just about a girl . . . and some young man she meets."

"A love story ? I hope it isn't too grown-up for my little Julia. You might read some of it aloud to me, dear."

"Yes, Grannie."

For the rest of the evening I read aloud, but I skipped lots. I simply couldn't read right out loud about kisses and love-letters. It made me too choky, remembering that probably I shall never know anything about love, except through stories like that.

Oh, isn't it a shame ! I that would so adore a love-letter.

Or is that "silliness" ?

Anyhow, I shall never have a love-letter of my own I thought.

And that brought me back again to the Silver Badger.

If we could only meet, for one little moment, and have this thing out ! I am afraid he "minded" my unkindness. I am sure he did. Dreadful !

THE BOY'S STORY

Funny how it rankles worse than any wound, bullet

or shrapnel or bayonet, that look she gave me ! Jove, how cold blue eyes can turn !

Her little sweet, proud face as she passed me ! She was like some very young princess whose dignity had been upset.

Hurt her feelings badly, I had ; I who—well, when all's said, *I have bled for her*. It was all the girls at home that we were fighting for, wasn't it ? She never thinks of that. But when I was sticking it out in the trenches up to my waist in dirty water, with the morning hate just coming across, I've often said to myself that my share of the England-Home-and-Beauty stunt meant my (imagination) "Jill." Now I've seen this girl. I know she was the one all the time. It was just that I hadn't seen her then. . . .

And she thinks I tried to insult her this morning.

I can't stick this. Why should I take it lying down ? Can't I have a shot at saying a word for myself ?

I can't speak to her again ; very well, I'll put it down on paper. Then I'll get some one to give her the letter as she goes by. I'll chance her reading it. She must read it.

Yes, I'll write now !

CHAPTER III

A LOVE-LETTER

"Often I have that strange and poignant Dream
Of some Unknown who meets my flame with flame."
—*Verlaine.*

THE BOY'S STORY

THIS evening, directly I had swallowed my quiet old meal, I got the table cleared and sat down to write.

Funny to think that this was my first shot at—yes, a love-letter. Funny that it should be to a girl whose very name I didn't know. That didn't make any difference. I loved her all right. I knew that for certain since this morning when her looking at me like that went through me like a knife, and I just meant to tell her so.

Difficulty was how to address her.

"Dear madam!" Too much like a shop acknowledging an esteemed cheque.

"Young lady?" No; the way some people call out to the waitress in a tea-room.

"Jill" was my own little name for her, but that wouldn't do straight away, of course.

Pity there's no translating the French way of beginning "Mademoiselle!" which is pretty and respectful and yet might be taken in an affectionate sense as well; "ma demoiselle"—"my lady"! That was what she meant to me, after all. Well! Why not?

Having got that start, I could begin scribbling away on my pad with the fountain-pen I'd kept right from

the beginning of the war (not so surprising perhaps, when you consider how few letters I'd had to write).

I wrote now, and, Jove, I found I was making up for those reams I hadn't written before to those folks at home that I hadn't got. I found myself doing what I never thought I should do in this world, putting down on paper things I'd not mentioned to a living soul. Funny, wasn't it? To this little maiden that I didn't know anything about except that she passed down a certain street every morning wearing a purple hat and carrying a brown leather case, and that she'd turned me down with a crash for venturing to say "good morning" to her—to this girl I wrote as I'd never talked to Tim Harrison, all the years we were pals. I couldn't have told him what I told her in that letter.

I put :

MY LITTLE LADY,

Please read this letter. There is nothing in it that I would not put if you were a princess and I were a boot-black, so you need not be afraid that it won't be respectful enough, even if it is outraging all the conventionalities for me to write to you at all.

Please let me tell you a story. I think it's going to be easier to explain to you that way, and even if you do laugh it will be better than having you angry with me and thinking you thought I thought all kinds of things. Please excuse grammar. Here's the story.

Once upon a time there was a boy called Jack Smith—rummy little chap—and he had dreams. He dreamt of a little island somewhere by where the dawn lives. It had a wonderful little lagoon in the middle and it was a wonderful little island altogether.

Here I chucked writing for a minute and sort of went back into those long-ago dreams of mine. They seemed to rise up like a rosy mist that hid my lodging-house sitting-room with the incandescent gas-bracket and the mustard-coloured wall-paper and my disreputable old overcoat hanging on the door and the souvenir shell-case that I'd got hold of at Lille, on the mantelpiece. Funny what different places we live in, in everyday life, to the places we wonder about in our minds, but never talk about. But I had to tell the little girl about my island.

I wrote on :

Most of it came out of books, I expect, but it seemed as if it belonged to him. Its waters were all opally because of the dawn, and it had white sand, all sparkly, and thousands of little pink shells. The grass and the trees were just there without being real because grass wasn't beautiful enough. The tips of some of the little feathery trees were just uncurling, and there were bracken-fronds softly standing like fairies going to rub their eyes all dewy in the dawn. It always was dawn there, you see ; sunrise. Please do not laugh.

No one was to really come to this island of his because they might have trodden on the pink shells and spoilt the white sands and left footmarks and shadows, and this boy didn't want them. But somehow he always knew some one was going to be there without walking about. Someone rather like fairy princesses and mermaids, only not so far away. A girl !

And one day in his dream she came and just was. He didn't see her face. She didn't ever talk, but somehow she just "was" a little more. It seemed to him so extraordinarily wonderful that I simply can't explain it.

He actually cried a bit when he woke up (he was a rummy little chap) because he knew that without this girl of his coming true (even if the island was only a dream) he would have to be lonely all his life.

Then he had to go to school and think about plenty of other things, not dreams. But he remembered the dreams, sometimes in the middle of prep. and that sort of thing. Any night he might see her again.

He actually put it in his prayers; he prayed so hard, such breathless whispers, that she would be again. In the morning she hadn't been.

He never used to forget her, and didn't want to do rotten things when some of the other boys did, because she was so wonderful. By this time he had just one great, great pal of his own, but he couldn't have let even that pal on to the island.

Then he grew up to be a big chap; a chap like everybody else. There are thousands like him all over the country, though perhaps not quite so lonely. Even when he was eighteen and nineteen, he never forgot or stopped hoping about the dream-girl that might be. He hadn't seen her face, but he had a name for her, a silly little pet name: "Jill," because his name was "Jack." And because of the dawn island where he'd dreamt her first, he used to love the sunrise which meant her.

Sometimes in those muddy, ghostly dawns in France, where pale, unshaven faces stared at others hardly sure if they were dead or dreamt or still alive and real, this boy would try to get away a bit and watch the sky and hope that perhaps he wouldn't get killed before he saw this dream-island girl of his.

Well, he was left alive and he did see her at last. He passed her in the street in London, and for the first time he saw her face. Then he saw it every day. Quite

soon he knew it must be her, though she didn't recognise him, didn't see him. He was sure, though, because he felt this was the one girl who could stop him from being lonely any more, even though he'd lost that great pal of his. They were meant to be friends (he and she), he thought, because he felt so utterly happy to see her. It made no difference that they hadn't spoken yet. But at last he had to speak.

That was this morning.

Here I turned over the sixth fresh page of my pad, Jove, what a screed! Was it what a girl would understand, I wondered?

I dug my teeth into my old pipe, for now I was coming down to brass tacks. Funny how absolutely convinced I felt that here, after four years of war and all! was "the" fight of my life. Me, against the odds that kept me from knowing that girl.

Little lady, I put, you know what happened. I spoke, and you thought I was just trying to be "fresh"? Perhaps if you've read this rigmarole so far you'll know how I really looked upon you. An ideal come to life, a dream that happened at last. I was clumsy; I didn't know what to do, and I made a false start. Could you forgive me? Could you let me start fair?

Have you any brothers that I could get to know? Or any relations who could "vet." me, so to speak, and who could decide whether I were the sort of man who could be allowed to call upon you? Couldn't they let me be about with them for a time first, while I was on my probation?

I don't want to "swank," but I'd like to say this for myself, if I may—there is nothing I would mind any friend of yours looking into about me, either at my job

(of which I'll enclose the address) or while I was serving. My Squadron Commander (I put his name) would say a word for me any day, I know.

Just the chance of meeting you, that's what I want. I can't let you pass while I wait there dumb and helpless watching you out of my sight, out of my life! Please, please, can't you let me have a shred of something to hope for? If you'll look at me next time, just for the merest instant, I shall take it that you will give me—not a promise that there'll ever be anything more, but just that chance.

It would mean everything to me.

For I am yours,

JACK SMITH.

Then I stared at the "reams" I'd written. But I wasn't going to read them over. I knew what was in 'em. Just all my heart.

Funny how natural it seemed, just at that moment! Nothing far-fetched or even too idiotically sentimental about it. It seemed a perfectly simple solution. I was going to put that letter into an envelope and fasten it up with an old-fashioned seal of my mother's. In the morning I was going to give it to my landlady's small boy. He's a decent kid, a boy scout, mad keen on soldiering, who makes himself into a regular batman for me. I meant to tell him: "Stanley, you will stand by in full patrol order as soon as I go out. You will follow me at twenty paces. When I pass a young lady in a purple hat I shall lift my stick as a signal to you. Upon coming up to her you will stop, salute smartly, and hand her the note."

That, I felt certain, was going to come off all right. She'd read and understand; she'd give me my chance.

We *must* be meant to meet ! I was as sure of that as I'd always been sure that we should get the Germans licked. I felt happy all over ; again that rosy mist filled my room, wiping out everything that wasn't just a joyous lovely dream of her and me together. . . .

Funny how one can get oneself swept off one's feet and into the middle of a day-dream like that at heaven only knows what an altitude ! Then, suddenly, quicker than any 'plane can crash to earth—down, down one comes with a bang to everyday life, to realise that one had been soaring in a fool's paradise, and that things one thought were natural enough, were quite impossible after all. . . .

A trifle can do the trick. In my case, now, what a little thing started to let me down with a rush !

Just a knock at my sitting-room door. Jumping up, I called, " Come in ! "

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO GOT ON WITH THE GIRLS

"The more you have known of the others,
The less you will settle to one."

—*Kipling.*

THE BOY'S STORY

THE man who came in was that fellow from the office that I've told you about—gets on so well with girls.

Grantham his name is, nicknamed "Slim." He's a long-legged, go-ey, merry sort of chap. Came in, laughing all over his face as usual, to ask me, "Say, old horse! Got a quid you could lend me till to-morrow? Came out, found I hadn't a cent left on me, and I've got to have a taxi. I'm taking a girl on to a dance."

He was in evening things under his old belted trench Burberry, cut very full and rather short; he's the sort of chap who'd think a bit about how much of his khaki breeches showed beneath his coat. Things I never can see are worth bothering about myself. But then, you couldn't find two chaps who were less alike than Slim Grantham and me. As different in our ways as chalk from cheese; absolutely.

He's only four years older; but he had those four years out in Canada; that's where he got his way of talking, and his easy way of making friends, I suppose. These Canadians are pretty wonderful; they hang on to all the "traditions" of the Old Country, *plus* the pep and ginger and go of the Yanks they live next door to. Although he's only lived in London since the

war, his time off from the office is simply honey-combed with engagements; you never knew such a thing. One day he left the cover of his writing-pad at the office, and you can imagine how the fellows chipped him. For on the margin of it was just one long list of names neatly jotted down :

“ Eileen,
Rose,
Green Chartreuse frock (find out name),
Giggie,
Dorothy M.”

and so on, with a little tick against those of them that he'd written to; and then his engagements for Saturday, “ Lunch, Brice's, 2.30. ‘ Hullo, America,’ E. Call for M. at 6. Dance 9.30, Ms, R. and G.”

He seems to bring with him wherever he goes a sort of feeling of having what he calls “ a whale of a time,” and it's always with a lot of girls as well as fellows. You can sort of . . . I don't know whether it's “ feel ” or “ breathe ” the background of girls' laughter, girls' bright frocks, girls' scented face-powder, girls' pretty teasing voices crying, “ Now, Mr. Grantham,” and buzzing about him. That's what I seem to catch, anyhow. There's always a bunch of them, and they're always laughing, enjoying life with plenty of noise and colour. There's a memory of their pattering little high-heeled shoes in the bits of tunes Slim hums as he lounges in. “ *Give me the Moonlight, give me the Girl—and leave the rest—to—me!* ” “ The ” girl—meaning just the girl he happens to like best at the moment, you understand; Eileen, or Dorothy, or the one in the green frock. And what makes him particularly keen on any girl—I've heard him say this himself—is seeing that some

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other fellow is keen too. Then he wants to cut him out; dance with her himself. After which the interest drifts to the next pretty face he sees that isn't looking at him. He's a nice fellow all right, but that's what he's like; looks upon love as something rollicking and amusing; a game. That's his atmosphere. He brings it with him everywhere.

So now . . . now d'you see what it meant when Slim Grantham broke bang into the middle of that dream where I'd lost myself?

It seemed as if upon some fairy scene a thousand glaring lights of everyday had gone up with a "click." My island, my feathery palm trees, my beach where I walked softly on the sparkly sands beside my little lady. . . . Away they went, like *that*! leaving me feeling no end of a fool in my ugly little room with the incandescent gas and the papers littering my table. I sort of clutched them—the sheets of paper—all together as I got to my feet.

"Hullo Slim; good evening," I heard myself say in a flat kind of voice. "What's that, lend you a quid? Right you are—at least I think I've got a note in here," and I began fumbling in my jacket pocket for my case.

I handed it to him and heard him burst out laughing before I saw I'd given him my empty tobacco-pouch.

"Wool-gathering, eh?" said Slim. "Bad sign that!" and then he twisted his head to one side and screwed his mouth up in a way he has that makes him look like the pictures of jesters in cap-and-bells. He was cocking an eye at all those written sheets of paper some in my hand, some on the table.

"By George!" he said. "I'd have to love the girl

some before I sat down and reeled off a yarn of that length to her, Jack ! ”

At this I felt I'd have given a month's pay for him not to have come in and seen what I was doing. It seemed to show me to myself, all of a sudden, as the champion ass I'd been. “ A yarn ” . . . It *was* a yarn ! . . . Cold and yet mad-angry I felt with him all in one spurt. I turned from getting out the right case this time and barked out at him : “ Who says I'm writing to a girl at all ? ”

I suppose I couldn't have sounded as angry as I was. Slim just laughed quite pleasantly from where he sat on the corner of the table, swinging his long black-trouser legs.

“ Why, if one doesn't write at that length to one's best girl,” he laughed, “ why spend one's time writing at all ? ”

“ Best girl,” I thought, and I wondered what he'd say if he knew who she was and what was in the letter, and I thought I could guess how he'd laugh and what a prize idiot he'd think me. . . .

So I was.

Yarning away like that to a girl I knew nothing about ! (Probably engaged.) *She'd* laugh too ; and small blame to her. *Anybody* would laugh. I seemed to hear everybody doing it ; in high-pitched girlish giggles that went through me.

I can't tell you how rotten it all felt.

Well, I pulled myself together and said (I think perfectly naturally), “ As it happens I've been copying out my notes,” here I did get all the pages together into my hand, “ from those lectures for the signalling exams.”

“ Mouldy sort of way of spending an evening, isn't

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it ? " said Slim, taking out a cigarette and knocking it against his case ; a silver case with a maple leaf and no end of curly flourishes and things all over it—some girl's idea of a lovely present for a man, I expect. " You ought to be dancing, man. Pity you don't fox-trot ; I'd have taken you along with me now. Why don't you learn ? Go to classes. Guinea for ten. Well worth it. Jack. I'll give you the address of a girl in Ealing who'd make you into the Jazz King in one week. No ? Please yourself ; you miss a lot, I tell you. "

" Tastes differ, " I said, as off-handedly as I could, and feeling rottener than ever ; left out of everything. " I don't think I'd care for dancing, and I don't get on with strangers, Slim. I'm not like you. . . . the ' lady you're taking to the dance, if it's fair to ask ? " I went on, trying to pull his leg for a bit of a change. " is it the one in the Chartreuse-coloured frock whose name you don't know ? "

" Aha ! But I *do* know, as it happens, " says Slim with a perky little tilt of his fair head. " Found that out all right the day after I met her. You know Binks and I met her at that subscription dance at the Caliph Rooms last Friday week. I was dancing with Gwladys at the time (Binks' cousin) and I saw this beauteous brunette sail into the rooms with her little crowd. ' Hul-lo, ' says I, ' *there's* a bully girl. ' Gwladys says, ' Which ? The one in green ? *Can't* say I admire your taste. ' (You know how beastly jealous a girl is of any other girl having a man look at her !)—' Perhaps, ' says Miss Gwladys, ' you'd like a dance with *her* ? ' ' I should, ' says I, and the very minute the waltz was over I march straight up to the nymph in green and say, ' May I have the next, please ? ' "

I looked at Slim ; telling myself how little I cared how he got to know all these blessed girls of his who make such a fuss about him. But at the same time I couldn't help asking him, " Who introduced you ? "

" Ah, get back to the Ark," laughed Slim. " She was with several people ; a naval Johnny and an aunt in black and glitters, and some other girls. I simply took on as if I knew the lot of them from their cradles. There's nothing like absolute neck to carry you through. This wench just gave me a little look, and a laugh. She danced with me all right ; danced divinely, too. Wouldn't tell me her name, though. Said, But surely you can't have *forgotten* it, if you know all of us ! You'd better get somebody to remind you.' Some kid."

His laughing cheery talk seemed to make that room of mine drearier every minute, and me, Jack Smith, more of a stick-in-the-mud and hopeless dud. Me with my dream-islands and a make-believe girl because I didn't know how to get a real one to look at me ! I confess I was beginning to feel mad envious of this chap. People always go on as if it were only *girls* who as Slim says are beastly jealous because other girls get all the attention from men. I can tell you that a fellow feels just as hurt and jealous when he sees other men getting everything from girls and himself nothing at all. Funny how I felt it then ; I felt it worse with every word Slim told me as he sat there smoking, swinging his legs, waiting (because it was still early) for the time to go on and call for this girl. She lived in a big house, Slim said, Bayswater way.

" How I found out was from the girl who gives the evening fox-trot class in Ealing," he said. " In the

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afternoons she's instructress at those rooms where the dances are. So on the Saturday I turned up at the rooms with Gwladys's little silk bag of tricks she'd given me to hold and forgotten, with her powder-box and lip-stick and what not. I showed it to the instructress girl, and, says I, 'Here's this bag belonging to Miss——ah, what is her name? Miss—Miss——' I snapped my fingers and said I should think of it in a minute. 'She comes to the classes here,' I said. 'She's dark, with very black eyes, and—let's see—she wears an evening frock just the colour of green Chartreuse.' 'Ah! I know the one you mean,' says the instructress. 'It's Miss Carteret, Phyllis Carteret, isn't it?' 'That's the one,' I said, slapping my knee, 'Miss Phyllis Carteret'—as if she and I had been pally from the year minus, 'only *now* I've forgotten the address.' So the little instructress told me, and I rang up and asked if I might call, and—well, that was that. They're topping people. Give you a whale of a time. I'll be getting along there in ten minutes."

I sat looking at him; me, with that—that balmy sort of love-letter in my hand and him talking away as if it were nothing of how he'd managed to make friends with the latest of his pretty girls, for, as I've told you, she's just one of the many.

How does he do it? How does he bring himself to have the absolute nerve?

I said in a stupid kind of way, "You know, you are the limit."

He laughed. "*Quel* impudence, eh? But there's no getting over it that impudence goes down with girls."

I thought again of the proud little face of the girl

to whom I'd spoken. I said, "Not with all of them, Slim."

He pulled that jester face at me again. "Ah! Been thinking over it? I guess you'll have to come to me for some tips, then, old horse. Look here, I believe you take things *trop* seriously——"

I muttered something about not taking anything at all, that way. . . .

He went on, looking at me quite kindly, as if he wanted to help. "See here, Jack. Girls don't *want* a fellow too sentimental. That's what you'd be, I bet. Girls don't want you too darned dignified and 'grown-up' either. Not nowadays. It's gone out since the war. There's no time. Devotion, and all that, it's——"

He tossed his cigarette into my little grate.

"Devotion's 'off,'" declared Slim, getting up. "No girl wants a fellow mooning after her at a respectful distance for umpty-twa years, which would be about your pace, my son. Girls are out for a good time, and all they can squeeze into it. They like a fellow to be the same. They want him jolly and on the spot and 'on' to all their own little ways. They don't think much of a chap who's too unsophisticated. They're like that. All girls; yes, don't waggle your old head as if you thought you'd got hold of some new brand——"

"Got hold—good Lord," I laughed, biting the stem of my old pipe nearly through with exasperation. "I tell you I don't even *know* any blessed girls, new 'brand' or old."

"There's where you make your mistake, then, son," said Slim, nodding as he stood there, his head nearly up to the gas-bracket and his fist on the belt of that

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skirted coat that made him look as waisty as a woman or a Highlander. "You get to know all the girls you can fancy. Every girl you meet helps to put you wise about the next fair nymph who's going to turn up."

As if I did "meet," you know. As if any did "turn up"!

Slim said, "The more you know about 'em, the more you can do with 'em. *Alors, cela c'est cela*; that's that in war-French. And the more you can get on with girls, the better time you're going to have in this wicked old world of ours. What girls? *Any* girls, man! You wouldn't believe what a little difference there is in 'em—except, of course, looks. I don't go in for poetry myself, but here's some that I think is hog-sense:

"And the things that you learn from the yellow and brown

They'll help you a lot with the white!"

I said (feeling puce-mad with him and Mr. Rudyard Kipling and myself and the whole earth), "I don't see what that's got to do with it or anything else; I don't see what it means."

Slim Grantham looked at me, quite serious and straight, this time. He suddenly put his hand on my shoulder, gave me a rum little quick pat, said in a hurried kind of way, "You wouldn't, Jack." Then he pulled down his coat and slung his muffler round his neck again, whistling softly.

"I'll be getting along. Where's my stick? And see here, now! Would you like me to introduce you to some folks next Sunday some time? I believe you'd like young Gwladys. Nice kid. *Très gentille*. Inclined to be jealous; but—well, *you'd* get on all

right. Yes ; I'll fix that up later for you. . . . Afraid I've no time now to go on being"—he laughed again—" '*the Child's Guide to Knowledge*,' but look here, buck up ; come and have one with me round the corner. There is just time for that, and I want some change out of this note of yours. Mustn't keep the lady waiting while a taxi-driver fumbles for silver, y'know. Keeping her waiting—that's the one crime on this earth no girl forgives a man. Get your hat."

He ran downstairs, whistling his favourite tune of "*Give me the Moonlight, give me the Girl*," while I turned the gas low. My ceiling grew all rosy with firelight then, for there was a good glow behind the bars at last.

I saw that, and then—well, you can guess what I did. My letter ; the six or seven sheets of that ridiculous yarn of a love-letter of mine. I'd make sure that nobody would ever laugh at that, and that it shouldn't even remind me again of what an ass I'd nearly made of myself. I'd settle *that*. I snatched up the papers, crumpled the lot into a ball. Down I rammed it into the hottest and reddest bit of my fire ; thrusting it well in with the stumpy poker. Up it blazed, the leaves unfolding again under the flames. On the paper that showed up all orange against the black ink I saw, for a second, bits of the sentences I'd written an hour ago.

" MY LITTLE LADY. . . .

" *It was a wonderful little island—someone rather like fairy princesses. . . .*"

That blazed ; then the leaves turned brittle and crackly and pale-grey, and on one of those writhing,

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rustling grey sheets I saw for a moment in moving letters of flame the sentence, "*for I am yours, Jack.*"

It went out; black. It was all gone. So was my mood of imagining that there was any sense in going on like that.

The ideal. . . . Dreams come true. . . . Such *tosh*!

You see, I was in a very different mood now.

All those weeks of lonely brooding, then the night of keying myself up to try and make a start with the girl in the purple hat, then the whole day of being stung and wretched because the little girl cut me, then the pouring of my whole secret heart into that letter, then the jolt of Slim's barging in just there, then all his sensible remarks about girls; "tips" from a chap who certainly ought to know all about 'em if anyone ought—well, all these things had piled themselves up on top of each other to make the new mood.

I suppose it was what they call "reaction"? It wasn't at all pretty, I tell you. Made me hate myself all the time I was in the middle of it. It was just "Well, I don't care if it *snows*; I've been on the wrong tack, but here's where I bank and slew round again. I'm in for just anything that's going. Fellows like Slim—why should they go about having whales of times just because they've learnt how to get on with girls? Can't *I* learn? The next girl that looks at me I'll speak to. Any girl that speaks to me to-night—the first girl—I'll talk to her, this time!"

As I legged it downstairs after Slim, that was what I'd come to!

CHAPTER V

MOONLIGHT—AND THREE WORDS

"No company? Welcome trumpery."

—*Irish Proverb.*

THE BOY'S STORY

BRIGHT, frosty moonlight outside! Might have been turned on specially for Slim's benefit with that eternal song of his, I thought, as we went to have our drink in the bar of Paddington Station.

We were coming out just as a taxi buzzed up to the station. Slim grabbed it before you could say "knife," but not before he'd lent a hand and got a very sweet smile from the young Red Cross nurse who'd driven up in it. Then he nipped in ("Cheer-oh, old horse!") and off he whisked to Bayswater to call for that beauteous brunette of his.

I s'pose he thought that his pal, the stick-in-the-mud and steady-going old horse, was now going to plod stolidly back home again to his notes on Railway Signalling?

But not I. Not much. Not on this glorious moonlight night, with the air like iced wine at one's lips and one's blood up with resentment and restlessness and devil-may-carishness for once. . . .

I wasn't going in. I turned to walk at a good pace along Edgware Road to Oxford Street. Such a night! The full moon sailed a sky that was as clear as a black mirror, and even the very brightest of thousands of stars turned to pale specks in its light. And, under-

neath, the London pavement shone polished as a ball-room floor, and the London lights seemed rosy and radiant, and Selfridge's buildings towered above them like a fairy palace, and everything looked wonderful and unreal and absolutely unlike what it had been in daylight. I don't know if the moon and the iced night breezes had got into my head. . . . It couldn't have been that one very small pink gin I'd had with Slim. . . . But as I strode quickly along towards Oxford Circus I felt that I was for the moment as unlike my daylight self as the London streets. I felt just mad for Adventure of some sort. I was all "revved up" for it, as we'd say in the squadron, and, Jove, I was sorry there was no more chance of a raid over London. Just the night for it! What I'd have given to be back again, with the Ruffs and the war still on! To be up to-night . . . to have *something* happening, instead of just the office and nothing . . .

Between my teeth I started to whistle Slim's tune, "*Give me the Moonlight—*"

How topping the moon would look on a sea through the palm-trees of an island! The little face of my dream-lady against shimmering waves came sliding into my mind again. . . .

Here, *none of that!* I stopped it, squashed it, trampled on it, as it were, with ammunition boots to crush it back out of my thoughts. I strode along, and turned my eyes away from the clear skies to the street lamps and the people passing or coming my way. . . .

Already I think I'd seen a girl in a white fur that stood out all bushy about her face, coming towards me. She'd passed along towards Marble Arch. Then I heard the click of heels behind me, and I saw the

white fur above a dark coat passing me quickly again. Just a little later she was coming again towards me. She was looking up at me.

Funny how that suddenly made me feel quite groggy and at the same time rather bucked.

As she came nearer, she lifted her face under the light she passed and smiled at me. The lamp-light sent the shade of her hat right over the top part of her face so that one just saw the tip of her nose, her chin, and her smiling mouth.

Once when we were in training on the downs I saw a clump of scarlet poppies growing out of a patch of white chalk. This girl's mouth reminded me of those poppies.

I hardly know how to tell you, but my heart thumped hard, and I remembered what I'd been thinking in my room about the very next girl who spoke to me. . . .

Decent enough fellows seemed to see nothing appalling in this thing. Matter of taste. Somehow it had always made me feel a bit sick and sorry myself—up to now. But now, on this particular evening, I—yes, I slackened the pace. I—the over-excited and reckless “I” of that rotten new mood—I hoped she'd speak.

She came on. Some people walking together got in front of her for a moment. Then they passed and she came close up, so close that the icy clean air seemed suddenly full of scent like a pot of musk in a shut-up room. This came from her white furs as she gave them a toss.

Then she did speak.

She said, in a Cockney voice that sounded quite soft and coaxing, three words which—well, if you

remember what had been rankling in me for weeks past, if you'll think of the office and my rooms and Tim Harrison gone and my dreams all a wash-out, then you'll perhaps realise that this girl in the street couldn't have found anything to say that would have gone home more direct.

This girl's voice asked me, "All alone, dearie?"

I don't know what I said. I don't know if I said anything; don't fancy I did. I think I must have turned to walk along beside her wherever she meant to go; I'd taken a step, I think.

And then just at that very moment, before I knew what was happening at all, I found myself gripped, pretty firmly, too, by the upper arm. Not by any woman's hand either. And I was wheeled right about on the pavement as a man's voice exclaimed in a hearty, cheery sort of way:

"Hul-lo! Jack, my boy! What d'you mean by keeping me waiting about like this? Get a move on. Nip into the car——"

A big green closed car was drawn up and chuff-chuffing away by the kerb. I was positively hustled towards it by the man who'd just marched up and clutched me by the biceps. He was a square-built, middle-aged man, I saw, in a fur-collared coat, this chap who'd called me right out loud by my Christian name, and he'd a beaky, clean-shaven face, rather pleasant. Only here was the queer part of it—I'd never set eyes upon it before in my life! Who on earth was this, and what was he after?

I don't know how he did it (I suppose it was because I'd had the wind knocked clean out of me by the cool way he'd taken me on the hop); but into that car I packed, and in he got beside me, after a word to the

chauffeur, and off we'd buzzed westwards (leaving the girl with the white fur and black hat and poppy mouth gaping under the lamp) before I could so much as get out my "I say, sir, I think there's some mistake——"

The stranger gave a short laugh (quite a jolly-sounding sort of one) as he turned against the padding of that car towards me.

"No mistake at all, my lad," he said cheerfully. "I know we don't know each other, but we're going to. My name's Weatherby. I'm a doctor man, and you're coming on with me to my place in Wimpole Street for a smoke and a chat. Curse if you like, but I've got something to say to you."

On we went to this big house of his in Wimpole Street. There in his top-hole smoking-room, in a huge arm-chair before the log-fire, he made me sit down and listen to what he'd got to say. It was the shortest but straightest talking to that I'd ever had, in the army or out of it. I needn't go into what it was about. You can imagine it, of course, he being a doctor and all that.

By the way, he'd been doctoring at the front for three years, he told me; and—funny thing!—it turned out that he'd actually met my squadron-commander, and knew all about what a topping fine chap he was. I tell you I soon began quite to enjoy this evening that had started out so differently. He, Doctor Weatherby, knew more than a bit about sport, too, and showed me some of his pots out of the corner cupboard, and asked me about what I went in for, and we yarned away about rowing, and about boxing, on which he seems as keen as mustard, so of course we got on like a house on fire about that.

Jolly interesting he was about the way professionalism seems to rot everything it touches, and about just why it is that when anything fine and sporting is brought off in any line it's pretty well certain to be by an amateur.

Awfully decent he was to me. You can't guess how different and how much more cheery everything seemed to me again, after we'd been chatting for a bit. Not just the "straight-talk" part, I mean, but the lot of it.

When it struck half-past ten he said he was going to pack me off.

"I'm a busy man, you know. My time's pretty well filled as a rule, but I've taken a fancy to you, young Jack. Curious I hit on your name; I might have said Tom or Harry."

He let me out himself. He said, "The fact is, you're just about the age and build and fighting weight of my own fellow—killed in sixteen. That's how I happened to notice you as I passed in the car. So—sooner than spend your evenings that way, come in and smoke a pipe. . . . Ring me up any time. . . . So long, lad."

As I went out again into the frosty night air and the streets under the moonlight I felt that at least I'd made a jolly good friend. Quite bucked, I felt, even if I was walking back to my solitary digs all alone!

THE GIRL'S STORY

All this evening I simply haven't been able to stop thinking about the Silver Badger.

Of course, you see, I've had to make up my mind what I'd better do about to-morrow morning, when we always pass each other. It will be so horribly

embarrassing after what happened to-day. He may not have thought of it again, I know. But I don't feel I can face him, even if it's only for the few seconds as we go by.

Now the question is, am I to walk on the other side of the street from his, or am I to take the turning by the Crescent, which brings me out to the stopping-place of the bus another way, so that I miss him altogether? Which?

I suppose walking on the opposite side would be rather silly, really. You can always see people across the street, especially if there's some reason that you'd better not! Besides, it would look as if I were doing it on purpose. . . .

I suppose I'd better do the other thing, and begin going round the other way, which will only take me about five minutes longer than the Silver Badger way. Yes; I'll do that. It's much the best plan. That's settled, then. I shall never see him again. Much better, I told myself as I went off rather early to my room.

The blind had been left up, and the moonlight was streaming in; I love it so much that I hadn't the heart to shut it out as I undressed. It made my very ordinary bedroom with Granny's Victorian furniture that's been left her look shadowy and mysterious and romantic.

A great white latticed diamond of moonlight was flung through the window on to my carpet; it ran up the wall in a wedge, catching the corner of my mahogany bed, and a strip of the dressing-table, which is all scrolls and curly-wiggles, like broccoli carved in wood. In my nightgown I moved towards the patch of light and saw the dim reflection of myself

move in the wardrobe glass ; my nightie was ghostly white and my two plaits were dark ropes hanging down it. I couldn't help being reminded of an old-fashioned steel engraving downstairs : "*Juliet on the Balcony.*"

But Juliet and her story are too *sickeningly* unlike me and my no-story-at-all ! *Who* wouldn't rather have hers and die the minute they married their Romeo ? He must have been wonderful. . . . Dark, though, as he was Italian. A fair man has a much sweeter expression, I think ; more boyish, more lovable, more like the Silver——

There ! And I wasn't going to think about that Silver Badger again.

But why not ? Since I shall never see him, there's no harm in making up "supposings" about—well, about an imaginary young man who just looked like him.

Supposing we'd met. Supposing he actually fell in love with me, instead of being right outside my life (probably with some other girl at this moment). Supposing we were sweethearts, and engaged ! Supposing I were able to go out with him on a heavenly evening like this—not to the theatre, that would be such a waste of moonlight, but for a tramp, walking in step with him over some heath through the icy, clean air. We shouldn't talk very much. Just to be together would be so lovely, with his hand slipped through my arm and holding me just above the elbow, holding me a little tighter when we crossed the road, and making me feel I was being so well-looked-after, so loved !

Too good to be true ; too glorious to happen ever.

Yet it does happen to girls. Some girls, other girls

lots and lots of girls, really. Girls who actually don't seem to think much of it. . . .

Oh! Why was I made the kind of girl who minds so horribly being without love, since I'm evidently fated to die an old maid?

A tap at my bedroom door.

Enter Grannie in her crimson cashmere dressing-gown and with her pretty grey hair all covered by a nun's veiling cap. Dear Grannie, who is so entirely happy with her patience and her knitting and her ordering of Ronuk and Brasso for the beloved furniture—shall I, when I'm *her* age, have stopped fretting over this eternal subject, shall I, too, be perfectly satisfied with the blank days, perfectly placid——

But as she came in I saw that Grannie wasn't at all placid; she was flurried and flushed and agitated about something.

She didn't even notice that my blinds were all up and the moonlight streaming into the bedroom, a thing that would usually strike her at once, as she has some superstition about the full moon being so bad for the brain, especially of young people.

In she pattered with her dear old woolwork bedroom slippers, exclaiming in a voice that showed she was more flurried than she'd been since the never-to-be-forgotten day when we travelled up from the country: "Oh, Julia! My dear child! My dear love! I had no idea . . . Good gracious me, who would ever have thought of such a thing?"

I stared at her, noticing that she held a letter in her hand.

"What is it, Grannie, dear?"

"I found it under the mat," Grannie said breathlessly. "Jane must have overlooked it when she

brought in the post. It just shows how she sweeps. My dearie, what an extraordinary thing——”

“But what, Grannie?”

“You may well say so,” said poor dear Grannie, sitting down with a little bump on my bed. “What, indeed! I’ve never realised, I suppose, that you were any older, really, than the dear little girl I taught to hem. And now—imagine! Here’s a young man——” She sort of fluttered the letter in her hand.

“A young *man*?” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” panted Grannie. She looked at the letter, and for a moment words seemed to fail her. Then she found some. In a little rush she added, “Wants to marry you!”

CHAPTER VI

THE LETTER THAT CAME

"Take a woman's first thoughts ; a man's second."
—Axiom.

THE GIRL'S STORY

CAN you guess my first thought ?

It leapt, like a kitten towards a dancing sunbeam, at the conclusion of—the Silver Badger.

What a shock of delight . . . how wonderful . . . how like a fairy-tale. . . . Yes, but of course it must be he who'd written to Grannie about me !

I thought—only "thought" isn't quick enough to describe the way that this came to me in the second that I stood there staring—I thought, "*But how did he know who I was ? and where I was ?*"

So quickly I felt at this extraordinary moment that I told myself, "*I knew all the time that this was what he meant ! I knew he was nice and that he liked me ! They say that a woman hardly ever does make a mistake about that, and here I was, quite right !*"

I'd even time to wonder how the Silver Badger had managed to find out about me. Had he followed me right down to the office, perhaps, and got my address from there ? (What *would* Mr. Lewis think of that !) Or no ; had he watched me coming home and letting myself in at this front door ? But how had he got hold of Grannie's name ?

Then all wondering was drowned in a warm wave

of joy that swept right over me. . . . Imagine this! *The Silver Badger!* . . .

All this filled just the one second before I managed to gasp, "What young man, Grannie? Who is he?"

"So very startling," murmured Grannie, shaking her night-capped head as she sat on my bed, holding the letter a long way off and peering at it, though I know she could not read a word without her spectacles and in that half-light. "Still, it's a manly, considerate letter, I will say. Very nicely indeed he writes——"

Here I felt that unless I were allowed to see that manly considerate letter of my Silver Badger's in another half minute I should *scream*. To think that I didn't yet know his name even! Clutching at the bed-post in my excitement and curling up my ten bare toes where I stood, I cried out softly but quite violently "Who writes?"

"Why, dear child," said Grannie, as if she had already told me this, "Mr. Lewis."

"*Mr. Lewis?*"

For another instant I didn't take it in. Then it struck me. I heard myself gasp "Grannie! You don't mean Mr. Lewis from the office?"

"Yes, dear, of course. What other Mr. Lewis could it be?"

"Oh!" very slowly. I suppose I must for the first flash have imagined that "Lewis" might be my Silver Badger's name too. "Oh!"

The second before I had been thrilling under a warm wave of joy. Now in this next second I stood there all frozen. As before, thoughts raced through my mind so much more quickly than I could speak or move or do anything except feel.

Not "my" Silver Badger—not the Silver Badger after all, then. Of course he hadn't written. He? Why should he write? A perfectly strange young man I happened to pass in the street? A young man that I'd snubbed? How too absurdly silly of me to have fancied such a thing, even for an instant! No wonder I felt stunned; it was because I was so deadly ashamed of myself for having been such an utter little donkey, even though it was only in the depths of my own heart that I'd imagined such nonsense.

Slowly I took my hand away from the bed-post and sat down on the eider-down beside Grannie, trying to collect myself and to speak sensibly about this other weird thing that apparently had really happened. . . . Mr. Lewis!

"Grannie, you said it was 'a young man.'"

"Yes, my love, young Mr. Lewis," repeated Grannie, still in her bewildered voice.

I told you that she always calls the head of our office that just because she was at school with his mother. I suppose the same sort of thing that made her see me still a child learning to hem makes her see Mr. Lewis just learning to shave himself? "Young" Mr. Lewis, indeed! How can I be expected to imagine his ever being young, even ages ago? Why! I used to see him at home at the Bank there when I was quite a little girl, and he looked exactly the same then as he does now. He was always very kind to me. Once, when I broke my dolly's china head, he brought me a lovely wax one from Carnarvon to stitch on to her sawdust body; and he always used to say, "Well! How's little Miss Julia to-day?" and to give me boxes of crystallised fruits. When we met him again

in London he was just as kind, and at the office just the same. And now——!

"What *does* he say, Grannie?"

"He says—Julia, dear, turn up the light. Good gracious, my love, draw down the blinds. The moon is shining right on to your bed here; what were you thinking about? . . . There! That is better. Now get into bed, do; you are shivering. And no wonder. Why *don't* you wear that nice thick flannel bed-jacket I got on purpose for you these bitter nights? . . . your *death* of cold . . . nothing next you but cobwebs . . . young people . . . dear, dear," sighed Grannie, who is such a small little person even in her outdoor things that I can't picture what would be left of her without those layers and layers that she wears of woollies. "Now, here's this letter. . . . Perhaps I had better read you parts of it."

She took her spectacle-case out of her dressing-gown pocket, put on her glasses and began to read.

"MY DEAR MRS. PARRY,

"You may perhaps be surprised at what I am about to ask you in this letter; it is, briefly, to request your sanction for my paying my addresses to your granddaughter, Miss Julia.

"I know that this will appear a little sudden, but circumstances seem to be altering so quickly at the present time that one finds oneself adapting one's own arrangements to those changes——"

"What he means by that I don't just make out," put in Grannie; "but I always think gentlemen's ways of expressing themselves are so difficult! The

letter goes on about 'the long friendship between our families.' Dear me, yes! It seems only yesterday that I was at school playing 'Mentra Gwen' with variations as a duet with little Nesta Lewis—Nesta Morgan that was, his poor mother! And then there's about his 'regard' for you, Julia, and what he thinks of you."

"What does he?" I couldn't help asking.

But Grannie answered primly, "'Praise to the face is open disgrace'; I needn't read that, but I can see he is sincere, the young man. He will tell you himself, I expect. He ends up—

"With your permission, I will call to-morrow (Sunday afternoon), about four o'clock, when I shall endeavour to come to an understanding with the young lady; and in any case I hope to remain, dear Mrs. Parry,

"Yours ever most sincerely,

"DAVID E. LEWIS."

And now I come to what he's like, this Mr. David E. Lewis, who has sent this letter that's come into our quiet home like a thunderbolt.

He's the last person you would connect with thunderbolts or excitement or suddenness of any sort.

But what *is* he like?

I've been thinking that over for this last hour that I haven't been able to sleep.

You know it's very difficult to know what a person really is like when you've been accustomed to the sight of them all your life. Just as most people never seem able to describe the appearance of their own brothers and sisters! Mr. Lewis might be an elder

brother to me ; or no, more like an uncle, since he seems much too old to be any brother of mine.

Forty-eight. . . .

I suppose that isn't really *old*, even if nobody but Grannie could call it young? I suppose it's quite ordinary for a *man* to begin to want to get married then? How late in the day it does seem——

Or *am* I no judge of ages to fall in love at?

People seem to consider that a man, even if he's elderly, isn't nearly as much so as a woman of the same age. Why is this? I should have thought that once they were sort of past falling in love or any kind of fun (say, at about twenty-eight), it wouldn't matter if they were a man or a woman!

But I was going to try and think of Mr. Lewis (who evidently thinks a man isn't ever "past" anything). I was going to try and think of him as if he were some perfect stranger that I'd only just met. Then I shall perhaps get some sort of a fresh impression.

A man of forty-eight ; has been partner in a bank in Wales ; came up to London when war broke out and worked in one of these "Control" offices, of which he is now head. A business-like man, I think they call it. Very particular about things being properly done. But "kindness itself," as Grannie once said of him.

Looks—I suppose after all he's not bad looking.

Figure: not very tall, but he couldn't be called a short man. Medium. Not stout, either, though he does move rather slowly and all in one piece, as it were. I've always liked watching soldiers move about quickly and lightly, as if their bodies weren't any weight to them even if they were big men ; I've liked to see them nice *shapes*.

Or am I faddy? Is figure in a man just an unimportant detail after all?

Face: "such a kind face" is the first thing you'd notice about Mr. Lewis, I'm sure. But that's expression, I suppose. What about features?

Eyes: yes, those are nice, I remember. What colour? Grey, I *think*. Very straight and honest-looking. Also kind.

Nose: just ordinary. Not hooked or turned up or anything special that I can remember.

Mouth: ordinary too. A moustache; sort of drabby-brown, the same colour as his hair. (He's not bad at all, really; but his hair does grow rather far back, and there isn't very much of it, of course. It's always been parted in the same place at the side.

Clothes: these I've not noticed much. *Aren't* men's "civvy" clothes hideous? Dull colours! Ridiculous shapes, like lamp-glasses and covers for haystacks! Might have been cut out of stair-carpet stuff on purpose to show how clumsy human beings can look if they try!

(Or am I just without any sense of beauty?)

But there's a sort of dark blue, very thick overcoat that Mr. Lewis wears, with the same sort of bowler hat that he's always had. . . . (It's not his fault if he couldn't get into khaki; he did try under Lord Derby's scheme.) And his boots and shoes are always particularly nice; this I am quite sure about, because one of the girls at the office (the one who "wants a jolly good time first before she gets engaged") told me so.

Voice: yes, they say most Welshmen have nice-speaking voices, so I only really notice the men who haven't, and the people at the office who say "a

thausand paounds"—I do hate it so! A very *kind* voice, Mr. Lewis has, I expect. "Kindness" again!

Is there anything else to think of . . . ?

Only of what I'm going to say to-morrow afternoon to the man who goes about with this voice and overcoat and face and things that I've just described. I couldn't possibly *marry* him, of course. How shall I tell him so that he won't mind at all?

I shall think of something when the time comes. I couldn't imagine marrying *him*, even though it is a little—(oo-hoo, what a yawn! I am getting sleepy at last)—even though it is a tiny bit encouraging that anybody at all should want to marry me. . . .

(Or am I unnatural to feel that?)

My last thought as I dropped off to sleep long after the moon had set was, "Ah, if it *could* have been the Silver Badger! If only the impossible had happened, if only he'd ever thought of writing a letter about me at all—I wonder what sort of a letter the Silver Badger, would have written? A lovely one, I'm sure . . . a very different one. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

SECOND THOUGHTS

"Lots of girls just fall in love—with Love. Other girls just get engaged—to Getting Engaged."

—*Remarks Remembered.*

THE GIRL'S STORY

HAVE any other girls, I wonder, got engaged to some man the very day after they'd solemnly said that they'd never dream of *him*?

Or am I an exception to every other sort of girl there's ever been?

Last night I was wondering how I could tell Mr. Lewis, without hurting his feelings, that I couldn't possibly think of marrying him. To-night here I am, engaged to him!

How did he manage to make me change my mind about a thing like that—how did it all happen? Even now I can't quite explain it; I couldn't say exactly *why*. . . . But somehow I wasn't *able* to do anything else. . . .

If he were not so nice and so *kind* it might have been different.

When he came into the upstairs sitting-room this afternoon, where Grannie had made Jane-the-Mill (our Welsh maid who'd come up with us) put a quite extravagant fire and had said I was to wait for him, the first thing I realised (after feeling suddenly hideously shy of him for the first time), was the kindness of his smile as he turned to me, carrying a big

bunch of flowers. He must have bought up all the mimosa and carnations and narcissus off the hamper of the old flower-woman who sits at the corner of our road.

"Brought a little posy for you, Miss Julia," he told me in exactly the kind encouraging voice he used to say, centuries ago, "*Brought a box of sweeties for a good little girl; I am sure she has been good, Mrs. Parry, hasn't she, eh?*" So that I couldn't help smiling too as I took the flowers.

"They're the only ones I could get, but they're yesterday's flowers, of course," he said, standing by the mantelpiece under the gold-framed mirror as big as a lake that reflected the top of his head and forehead. "Still, they'll freshen up a bit when you get them into water."

"I'll put them in now." For I hate to see flowers just left when they are brought, dear things! We'd none in the sitting-room unless you count the very dull castor-oil plant and the aspidistras in pots on the wire-work stands between the window curtains. So I was glad to fetch a tall green jar for the mimosa and some glass vases for the other things; and Mr. Lewis watched me as I began to put them in.

"Do sit down, Mr. Lewis, won't you?" I said, beginning to feel wretchedly nervous again as I cut the strings that tied up the branches of fluffy yellow mimosa. "Grannie will be down in a moment." (I had made her promise this, by the way, just before I came in.)

Mr. Lewis sat down in the corner of the couch, drawn up by the fire. "Well, really, I hope Mrs. Parry won't hurry for a minute or two. It was you I wanted to have a word with, Miss Julia, as perhaps you know."

Not knowing what I'd better say here, I snapped off some of the long ends of the mimosa.

Mr. Lewis said, still pleasantly, and watching me all the time: "Did you know?"

"Yes," I said, feeling glad I'd something to do with my hands while I had this horrible job before me of refusing.

"Mrs. Parry told you, then, what was in my letter?"

"Yes," I said again, wishing to goodness I had not left to the last minute the actual wording of my reply. I thought it would come of itself when I was speaking to him. But nothing seemed going to occur to me!

"Well? What did you think of it, Miss Julia? That it had taken the old bachelor a long time to make up his mind to take the plunge, eh? And that it was cheek enough on his part to dare to think of asking such a young little lady? Might have looked out for some one more staid and mature, more suitable for a man of his years? That was about it, eh?"

I gave the sort of "oh" that means nothing at all, and wished that he were not looking at me with a sudden gleam of fun in his steady, grey, friendly eyes and that he didn't speak in that pleasant voice with that trace of the good old Carnarvonshire accent that took me right back to the days at home, centuries ago, when I was perfectly happy cutting out dolls' clothes for the waxen Winifred—yes, at that distressing moment all I could think of was what my favourite dolly's name had been! And how much I wished Mr. Lewis were not an old friend of the family's; that would have made things so much easier!

He said nothing more for a moment while I finished

putting in the carnations. Then he began again: "Well, about this great question. To begin with, there was all this at the office——"

"The office, Mr. Lewis?"

"The office," he said, nodding. "As I said to Mrs. Parry . . . changes everything! The office will be shutting down by degrees, you know, like so many others of these places. Already the staff is being reduced. And a short time ago I said to myself that little Miss Julia would have to be among the first of the young ladies whose services were to be dispensed with."

I looked up surprised and rather indignant.

"Why *my* services? Haven't I been working well?"

"You have, indeed, you certainly have. A splendid, little, neat worker you've been." Mr. Lewis assured me. "It isn't that at all. It's only that I have to consider which of my workers are independent, from the financial point of view, of their work. And I knew that here were you, very comfortable here with your grannie. Thirty-five shillings a week doesn't mean to you what it does to some of the young ladies. It does not, indeed. And so, sorry as everybody there would be to part with you—it would be only fair that in a couple of weeks you would have to go."

"I see," rather flatly.

"Sorry I should be," said Mr. Lewis, smiling at me again, "to part with you myself. I realised that too. For quite a long time now (I shouldn't be surprised) I've realised it. And if I am to go away again and back to Wales, as in all probability I may do, I should be missing one young—young little lady,

that I should have to leave behind me in London town."

"Oh, dear," I began, feeling uncomfortable again. Before I could say any more, Mr. Lewis leant forward in the couch, and took hold of me very gently by my hand, drawing me nearer to him.

"Come," he said, exactly as if I were a child very shy before visitors. "What reason is there, after all, that I shouldn't bring this little girl away with me when I go?"

"Oh, I am afraid *not*!" (in a great hurry).

"Now, why not?" asked Mr. Lewis, drawing me to him still very gently until I found myself half sitting on the arm of his seat, as I had done about ten years ago. "Why not, eh? She doesn't think I'd be very kind to her?"

"Oh, yes, I know you would."

"Well, then! Always been great friends, haven't we? I hoped," he said, still as if he were talking to a child, "that you liked me a little, too, dear."

"Oh yes, I do." I felt at that moment that I liked him better than ever I'd done before, and that nothing in the world had ever made me sorrier than having to hurt him now, this kindly, gentle man with the pleasant face—it was a pleasant face!—and the "homey" sounding voice and the honest grey eyes that were looking with more and more kindness into my flushed face. "I do like you," I said, quite miserably, "but I've never—never thought about you in that way."

"Try," suggested Mr. Lewis, "to think about me in that way now."

Was it my fancy that this sounded like a nurse coaxing some wilful little girl? "*Try to eat up your*

sago pudding; pretend it's lovely jam-roll and see how quickly it goes down!" And is that a ridiculous thing to say to anybody who can taste any difference in anything? Or am I just tiresome and ungrateful?

Uncomfortable and uncertain I sat there on that chair-arm, he still holding my hand. He patted it.

"Now, try to think of me—not just as the old fogey that you've always known. Not as the mandarin at the office, eh?—who would let you hear about it if you were two minutes late! Think of me"—he took hold of my other hand—"as a man who didn't get much time, when he was a youngster, for the things he's beginning to miss now. His time seems to be coming at last; and what does it mean to him? You. Yes! Think of me as the fellow who's always looked upon you as the dearest little girl he ever met; yes, and the prettiest one, too!"

At these words I couldn't help a sort of curious little warm glow stealing all round my heart. It was being so gratified, I suppose, over my very first compliment. This was flattery, which they say no woman is insensible to.

Or can she *try* to be?

I began, in the most feeble way, "Mr. Lewis, you're too kind to me."

"Not half so kind as I should like to be," he told me, holding both my hands in that gentle, encouraging clasp. "There's nothing I could do that I wouldn't do for you, if you were my little wife, Miss Julia. You know I shall be going back to the bank as my own. Not a bad home it would make, with someone nice there at the head of it, and——"

I think he went on describing the new room he was

having thrown out, and the bit of conservatory, and the piano, and about how he'd always like to have a few people about ; he liked a little cheerfulness and a little life as well as any man.

" No reason I shouldn't manage to make you happy, I think," he said, nodding at me while I sat there, finding it too difficult to interrupt him yet. " No reason ! You wouldn't find anybody more sincerely fond of you, my dear. It's true I might be a little younger. But a younger man means a more selfish and inconsiderate and exacting husband, nine times out of ten."

" Does it ? " (rather forlornly).

" I think so," he said, still with his friendly eyes on my face. " You haven't been thinking of some younger man, little Julia, have you ? "

" I don't know any men." But I felt my cheeks turning hotter. If he had guessed those idiotically silly thoughts I'd had about the Silver Badger ! But they were only thoughts, which don't count. . . . I wriggled one hand out of Mr. Lewis's, to put back the bit of hair that curls against my cheek and to give me the excuse for turning away my face for a moment.

He held up his finger at me, and said, playfully but anxiously, " Sure ? Quite sure that some younger, luckier dog hasn't been trying to make love to my little young lady ? "

" Oh, perfectly sure. Nobody's ever *thought* of it."

" Well, I will make up for that," said Mr. Lewis simply, in quite a boyish sort of voice. " That being so, then, Julia——"

How was I going to get out my " No " ? I said all in a flurry, " You know I can't ever leave Grannie ! "

"The old lady? We'll see about all that later. There's plenty of time to settle what we'll do, little girlie," said Mr. Lewis, quite tenderly pressing the hand he held against his rather prickly moustache. "I wouldn't hurry you—oh, I won't rush you in anything, I promise you. You take your own time, little one. And now we are engaged——"

"Engaged—oh, no——"

"Oh, *yes*," said Mr. Lewis, very affectionately but firmly, and smiling at me in a way that I simply couldn't help seeing was nice—soothing even. "Please isn't the little girl going to come and sit on my knee for a minute?"

This, again, was so exactly like the visitor making friends with the shy child of the house. Perhaps it was this that made me feel as if I were nine years old again. And when I was nine Mr. Lewis often did take me on his knee. It seemed scarcely different now, scarcely different when he slipped his kindly, solid arm round me and held it there, then, drawing me nearer, kissed me two or three times on the cheek.

Those kisses were quite gentle and unfrightening, even though they smelt a little of tobacco and shaving soap, and were, of course, the only kisses I'd had from a grown-up man since I'd been a grown-up girl.

Was it because he was such an old friend that it didn't seem anything like what I've read about kissing (which always seems to be either horrible or too wonderful)? Or is that *not* the way to sum up the kisses of a man who wants to marry you?

Anyhow, I felt somehow that these weren't an important sort of kiss. Or was this my ignorance?

I didn't even feel inclined to pull away. I only said perfectly calmly, because I felt quite calm and

even chummy with him, "But I don't think I *want* to marry you, Mr. Lewis."

"That," said Mr. Lewis, "will come later on. I shall make myself so indispensable that you won't be able to help yourself."

He said it in a way that was so absolutely sure of himself, but with such a twinkle of fun and friendliness in his eye that I couldn't help laughing a little.

And it was just as I laughed, sitting there apparently perfectly happy on his knee, that Grannie came into the room straight upon us.

I can't tell you how it was that, as I sprang up in a frightful hurry, I felt ten thousand times more shy of Grannie than I ever had of Mr. Lewis himself.

My face burned and my knees were all wobbly, and my voice died away in my throat so that for minutes I could not say one single word. No, not even when Mr. Lewis got up too, and, taking my hand into a very big, warm clasp, said, "Mrs. Parry, your little girl here has been very good to me——"

Good?

"And I hope you won't grudge her too much to some one who will try his very utmost to be a good husband to her!"

Husband! I opened my mouth to say it really wasn't what I meant. But what I did mean seemed suddenly so hazy and far away and feeble! Nothing seemed real except Grannie's warm, bright sitting-room, all scented now by the mimosa standing under that steel engraving of "Juliet," and the sturdy solid figure of Mr. Lewis in his dark suit, and my little Grannie in her black dress, with her mauve woolly shawl and beautifully tidy grey hair, crying, "Oh, my little Julia! My dear little girl!" and hugging

me and then turning to put both hands out to Mr. Lewis and to say, almost in tears, "To think—to think that I should become a relation to poor Nesta's boy!"

"Boy"—you know!

I suppose that, to her, Mr. Lewis and I seemed very much of an age!

But even at that upsetting moment it struck me that after all, by the side of Grannie, Mr. Lewis did look not so *ghastly* old; his eyes were bright and there was a nice colour in his face, and he had positively pretty teeth as he stood there smiling (still holding my hand), as if he were just terribly proud of himself for having been made Prime Minister or something! I don't see how anybody but a heart of stone could have upset things at that moment by saying they weren't engaged!

I couldn't; I could not. And every minute that passed while I wasn't saying so seemed to make it more impossible not to let this thing go on. It wasn't as if there were anybody else who wanted to marry me, or as if there ever would be. It was either this—which might not be at all bad, alter all—or staying as I was with Grannie, who would evidently be disappointed to death if I suddenly turned round again and refused Mr. Lewis for no reason.

It *would* be "for no reason" if I did. . . .

Or was the fact that there was "no reason" not reason enough against it?

Or was that a mad idea that only a silly girl like me would think of?

Everything seems so mixed up and uncertain. . . . Or is this trying to make excuses for myself?

(Excuses for *what*?)

The rest of the afternoon is a kind of dream to me . . . I know I began to say something about "Mr. Lewis" and he twinkled at me and said it would have to be "David" from now on.

And I said "David"—which was the same thing as saying "Yes" to his proposal.

This thought kept me silent all tea-time; but dear old Grannie prattled away about what lovely flowers and poor Nesta at school, such beautiful fancywork she used to do and what a comfort and weight off her mind it was to her to know that now, whatever happened to her (Grannie), there was Nesta's boy, who would be kindness itself to her little Julia. . . .

I am sure he will. -I know I must be, as Grannie said, a very lucky girl.

But—is it only in books that proposals and getting engaged and having a fiancé to sit by one for the first time and stay for supper are such exciting, fluttering, deliciously thrilling things and make one feel that the whole world has been changed into a seventh heaven, beautiful for ever?

Or am I just hard to please? Or shall I settle down better presently?

Of course it is unsettling for the moment. Any newly-engaged girl finds it so, I dare say. . . .

Or am I the first one who's ever cried herself to sleep over it?

CHAPTER VIII

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE

*"Companie, with honestie, I love, and shall until I die."
—King Henry VIII.*

THE BOY'S STORY

FUNNY thing how for weeks I've seemed to be without any friend at all, and now within two days I seem to be getting so many new pals that I can't sort 'em.

On Saturday night there was that long chin with that doctor man. On the Sunday after, in blew Slim again to say he'd been ringing up the folks where this girl he knew was going to spend the evening, and that he'd told them he was bringing along another man; me, that was.

"D'you think I'm wanted, barging into a strange crowd like this?" I said, rather doubtfully. "I haven't spent an evening out anywhere for donkey's years, either——"

"Time you started again, then, old horse. Dash it all, you shall have one bright spot. After this I'll let you struggle along solo, but this'll be the thin end of the wedge."

And I was reminded of how Doctor Weatherby had said, after giving me that bit of a telling off the night before, "Whenever you've the chance, lad, get about and meet fresh people. Most people may be bores, but some of them are bound to be interesting or to introduce you to interesting friends, or to have plenty of young people belonging to them, or something like

that. Take every chance of meeting girls. Lots of girls ; the kind who'd be your sister's chums, if you had sisters."

He'd wound up : " The home of a young fellow just growing up ought to be kept full of other young faces, and frocks, and dance-music, and fun. That's the principle I'd meant to bring my fellow up on. Boys want ' the odd drink.' *Let them have the odd drink—at home.*"

I remembered this as I dived into the Bakerloo Tube at six-thirty on Sunday evening with Slim Grantham.

Slim's a bit *vague* in some ways.

When I asked him where we were going, he said : " Oh, the Dug-out ! I often give them a look in, Sundays. Son generally gets up from camp week-ends and brings along half the wing with him, and Lou usually has a couple of girls around," and left me to make what I could of *that*.

We got out at Baker Street and walked up a wide empty street between big old-fashioned houses that I suppose were let off in flats, and presently Slim ran up some steps, pressed a bell and then rapped twice with his cane at a door.

After a bit it was opened by a big, but rather square-built R.A.F. cadet with a very young, pink face, who took a whacking cigar out of his mouth and sang out in a deep voice, " Hullo, Slim ! "

" Hullo, Son," says Slim. " Here's this chap I've brought along——"

" Hullo, Jack," says this flight cadet to me in a casual, jolly sort of way, without bothering to explain that Slim had already told him my name over the phone. " Come on in."

We followed him down rather a dark passage, with

doors on each side, to another door right at the end that stood just a-jar. Bright firelight came through the crack of it, and tobacco smoke, and a rumble of voices and a woman's laugh, very merry.

The flight cadet started to push the door open very gingerly. "It's that Chesterfield with the end gone again," he explained, and evidently something was being propped up and something else wheeled aside before we could make our way in. . . .

I wondered what I was coming to. I wasn't looking forward to anything much—but I must say I hardly reckoned for the very unusual sort of party it was going to turn out. "Party" was hardly even the word for the show; and yet I saw at once that it was going to be a good deal better fun than lots of formal expensive does with everything just so.

To begin with, the little bright, warm room we got into was fuller than anything I've ever been in, barring some of those troop-trains at the beginning. How on earth they'd managed to cram into it—that big Chesterfield with the let-down end, some chairs, a writing-table with drawers, a brass fender, and a dinner-table already laid is more than I can tell you. To say nothing of the gang of people that was collected there, looming through the smoke-haze and yapping and laughing nineteen to the dozen! Dare say they seemed twice the number they really were, just because I hadn't set eyes on any of them before. There was a bunch of frocks, yellow, grey and pink. And several fellows in khaki that made me feel as if I'd somehow got back into "A" Flight again, what with the talk about engines and every man in the push calling every other man "George," no matter what his real name was! As for the hostess of this lot, she was a bit of

a surprise ; a short merry-faced lady in a black silk skirt, showing ankles that honestly weren't [any thicker than the other girls' wrists, being called " Mums " by that hefty R.A.F. cadet (" Son ") who'd opened the door. All the other fellows and girls called her by her pet name, " Lou." She wore one of those extraordinarily thin mauve blouses (funny how women don't all die of cold !) and lots of beads and hanging things, and a pearl necklace and turquoise ear-rings as blue as her own laughing eyes. I noticed those because I think blue is the only colour for eyes ; the rest I noticed because she sort of took me under her wing at once and put me next to her at table and let me help her carve the ham.

Topping ham, *and* salad, *and* trifle. . . . But imagine the casual way they cleared the table after dinner, piling the things all up on to a big tray and then shoving them outside into the hall and shutting the door and trusting to luck, I suppose, that none of the other boarders in the house went and walked into the whole works ! And then the cheery way we all settled down again and those who couldn't squeeze on to the Chesterfield squatted down on the floor among cushions and soda-water siphons and oranges and girls' needlework . . . and then the way " Son's " mother picking her way across us and laughing, " I suppose this is what's meant by '*Guests, star-scattered on the grass*' ? " opened a door at the other side of the room and went into what seemed to be a bedroom, only she'd wedged a piano into it, and now she sat down at it, and, rattling off a fox-trot, left the door open so that we could hear even through the talk. . . .

Jove ! What a noise there was ! But I didn't mind it. I didn't mind, either, that the girl hadn't

turned up after all whom Slim wanted me to meet. . . .

"Always the way," Son's mother called out through the music, when her name was mentioned. "You never can depend on these run-after, pretty girls."

Here a regular storm of comments burst out as it always does, I suppose, when anybody mentions anybody else's looks in a crowd where they are known.

Some calling out, "Oh, not *pretty*!" and some, "Oh, yes, *very* pretty," and then somebody else shouting, "Not a patch on Slim's Green Chartreuse kid; now, she's IT!"

"Half of that's the way she turns herself out, man! It's not really that she's so good-looking——"

"Oh! But she's got a *nice* expression!"

"May as well say she's plain at once, then!" loudly from Yellow Frock. "Just like '*Interesting face*' always means, '*Face like a horse*'!"

Here Son, with his mouth full of preserved ginger, said horses had the loveliest faces you could see anywhere. And, by Jove, no human being was ever born with such beautiful eyes as horses had.

"Oh, dry up, old cavalry man!" cried his mother again, laughing through the music. "There's only one thing to be said about what's attractive! *To some you are; to some you aren't.* . . . What does Mr. Smith think about whether the Green Chartreuse girl is pretty?"

I lifted up my voice to say, "I've never seen the lady!"

Loud cries of "Oh, but you must!" from several voices; and then one of Son's fellow-cadets shouted above the din, "What about introducing him to her at this dance? She's coming to this dance on the ninth, Slim, isn't she?"

"Believe so," said Slim, who was sitting on the rug, leaning up very comfortably against Pink Frock's knee while he cracked walnuts for Yellow Frock.

"*Give me the firelight, give me the girl,*" was evidently his version of it to-night; and Yellow Frock, who'd been ragging him a good deal about one thing and another, represented "the" girl for the time being. I never caught any of their real names.

The "O.I.C. dances" chap went on with his arrangements for the ninth. "You're coming, Lou and Son . . . and you three? . . . Righto. . . . And what about you, George?" This was turning to me. "You come along too."

"Me? Oh! Afraid I don't dance——"

"Rot. Of course you dance. Everybody dances. Doesn't he dance, Slim?"

"Sure," said Slim, firmly, turning his head up against the pink skirt. "I've told him he's got to. Haven't I, Jack? You bet he learned the auk-trot or the veleta or the mastodon-waggle or whatever was the go in his little home-town of Fossilville—Pre-War, in his wild youth. Ah, he'll soon pick up a few of the slightly more recent stunts, won't you, old horse?"

"Might have a shot at it," I said, laughing, with a kind of "why not" feeling. A bit of a change the idea of going about to rooms and fox-trotting and jazzing and "hesitating" with the rest of them. Me, dancing! . . . Well! It was driving in the thin end of the wedge with a vengeance, wasn't it? . . . What a joke! . . .

For before we left I found myself promising to ring up the Dug-out quite soon; Son's mother said she generally had it bulging with boys and girls on Sunday

evenings—and you could see she *would*, and that boys would be certain of that “odd drink” in the way of a welcome and a cheery time. And I promised, too, to get myself taken in hand at a dance-class somewhere near Gloucester Road station that all these people seemed to know.

“Bully,” said Slim on the doorstep. “Flighty old horse! You’ll be leaving us all behind in the social whirl before we can say knife. Thursday evening, then, at eight sharp. So long!” He shook his stick at me and was off in a hurry with Yellow Frock (in furs), whom he was seeing home to Chelsea.

I took Grey Frock along to the Tube. A jolly nice girl; works in some voluntary hospital, awfully keen on music. She said something about the Sunday Concerts . . . I might ask her to come to one some time. . . .

That party to-night seems to have given me quite a taste for more. What a free-and-easy little show it was . . . and the rummiest part of it all was that, in spite of my going there with my mind more or less made up not to enjoy myself, I had enjoyed every minute of it more than I can tell you!

And yet—funny thing how I didn’t even realise this until I’d got back to my digs—yet this was the first evening for weeks that I hadn’t given a thought to that little girl.

After all, why should I think of the girl again? Shan’t even see her again. What I mean to do is to take the Tube to the first station along my road, so that we don’t pass each other. Not after yesterday, thanks! Lord knows I don’t want to force myself anywhere where I’m not wanted, and she showed me plainly enough that I wasn’t.

"My little lady"—here's the end of *her* as far as I'm concerned. A sweet little face; good luck to it, even if it wouldn't look at me.

All those people to-night were top-hole to me. . . .

The next thing I've got to look forward to is that dancing class.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL FROM "VOGUE"

"Mistress of fash—a little rash, but awf'ly smart and awf'ly chic."
—Gilbert Frankau.

THE BOY'S STORY

By Jove, I little knew what I was letting myself in for!

The thin edge of the wedge hadn't prepared me for this living in a regular whirl that's happened since—nor for what I never thought would happen; me getting to be really good pals with a girl. Oh, only just in a pally way, of course. But still, a girl; and so unexpected, the whole thing. . . .

When Slim Grantham said this affair on Thursday evening was a dancing-class, I thought I'd find an awkward squad of people all more or less flopping and floundering about and as hazy about where to put their feet as I was myself.

But no such thing. It was a regular party!

I realised this as soon as we arrived at the entrance to this big house in the longest, straightest road in London. "We" meaning Son and his merry little mother and half a dozen of the people who'd been at the Dug-out that Sunday. First and foremost, of course, Slim and Miss Yellow-Frock. He was still keenly interested in that girl, I saw; seemed fearfully anxious that she shouldn't get demobilised (as she was an A.S.C. driver) and go back just yet to Shanghai, where her people lived. . . .

Well, but about this house where these classes were held. People were already going in ; girls in wraps, carrying shoe-bags, were tripping up the steps, and fellows in uniform. Inside—well, it looked a palatial show to me after Slim and Son and I had got rid of our hats and things downstairs and were following the ladies up that enormous stone staircase with a sort of conservatory alcove-place just before you came to the first landing. Plenty of people were sitting out there, on steps and in basket-chairs.

As our party passed some girl waved her hand and another girl's voice cried, "Ah, *there's* Slim," as if everybody had been waiting for him. Perhaps they had. Anyhow, as soon as we got into the big room on the first landing which was all bright with amber lights set round the walls and reflected down from the gilded ceiling and sideways from the mirrors and up from the polished floor, Slim seemed to be surrounded in a moment. I saw a regular flower-border of coloured frocks grow up round him, as it were ; and over the top of it his fair head, tilted, and his face looking down and twisted into that jester's laugh of his. Some people had pounced on "Lou and Son," too, and dragged them off to talk to the girl at the piano . . . there was a sort of general buzz, everybody seemed to know everybody.

So for just a moment I was left rather high and dry near the door, looking round this room. Two rooms, really, I suppose, only the folding doors had been taken away between the smaller place where the band was and the front one. On the goldeny walls were a couple of mirrors about ten by six, with ancient-looking gilt frames and garlands about them. In

front of the windows on to the street were great sweeps of curtains in amber brocade.

Against these curtains a tall black-headed girl was standing, with her back to me.

Funny to think how this was going to turn out to be my first girl friend!

She was rather—effective. Is that the word? Awfully reminding you of those illustrations in "*Vogue*" that you'd think nobody could possibly be like. This girl was. Same clothes, same shoes with criss-cross ribbons up her ankles, same sort of way of standing. "Smart," I suppose. I'd never liked the idea of a "smart" girl; never seems soft or sweet-looking enough (I've told you I was hopelessly old-fash.). But I couldn't help looking at this one. Her hair, which was bobbed and parted at one side, and with a silver thingummy all round it, was just about as black as anything I've struck. Her arms and shoulders (which you saw absolutely *all* of) were ever so white. I wondered if she'd got a pretty face.

She turned side-face. Not what I should call pretty. But—funny how I thought I noticed something in that moment—I thought that girl in her gay and "snappy" frock looked miserable. Absolutely fed up. Fed to the wide! Why on earth should she be, I wondered? . . . She saw me looking at her, and in one flash that look was gone—if it had ever been there.

Sort of surprised, then a little amused, but quite friendly, she looked back at me. Then, quickly, she crossed the room to me. She told me afterwards it was because I "seemed so forlorn"! and she was going to ask if I were looking for some one or if I wanted to ask about classes. But at that moment Slim

disentangled himself from his flower-garden of girls and came up to me too (holding on to a ribbon of Miss Yellow Frock's dress as if he thought she'd be off back to Shanghai if he didn't) to introduce me to the lady who held the class. This was a tiny little person with a band of green leaves about her forehead and feet, so absurd you wondered how she could walk about on 'em! Just as she was saying "how d'you do" to me, the music started from the other end of the room; piano, violin, banjo, and various farm-yardy tootles and squeaks . . . first time I'd heard a jazz band!

"You want a partner; I'll give you a really good one," said the little dancing-mistress, briskly. "Phyllis!" she turned to the black-and-white "*Vogue*" lady. "You take Mr. Grantham's friend, will you, and put him in the way of things?"

"Try to!" said this girl gaily; and I saw I'd made no end of a mistake in imagining she had been fed up. Why, she was as happy as a sandboy, I saw, smiling all over her face as she tossed little nods to me, and to Slim and Miss Yellow-Frock over my shoulder.

Slim gave her a glance with his head on one side and said as if he wasn't sure about something, "Now, wasn't this my dance?"

"Oh, no!" said the *Vogue* girl, brightly, "I'm not a mere partner to-night, I'm assistant, because Mrs. Delaforce who helps Cecily is down with 'flu and I'm carrying on for her. Promised. I'm taking your friend, because he's new."

"Start in, then, old horse," said Slim encouragingly to me (I not having had a chance to get in edgeways that I'd scarcely even waltzed at all, ever!) and he

and his Miss Yellow-Frock circled away together just as my partner took my hands and put them where they ought to go and sort of hypnotised me into plunging with her into the "Hesitation Waltz."

"Oh, Lord . . ."

More "hesitation" than "waltz" about it as far as my steps were concerned, I can tell you. And not so much "hesitation" as downright "collision"! An awful ass I felt, as if I were making no end of an exhibition of myself, and so awful sorry for the girl! Cutting my teeth on her, nothing less. . . .

Now she was a sportsman about it. Most awfully decent and patient. Saying to me, "Oh, no, you're not a *bit* clumsy; not for a beginner, not at all!" And, "For such a big person d'you know you're extraordinarily light? . . . But then I always think you tall men are as light as a feather!" And one of the times when I barged her into Slim she shook her bobbed head at him and said to him as we passed, "Your fault! I always tell you about your shoulders; *quite* wrong again!" And she smiled all the time as if she thoroughly enjoyed my bumping her along over the slippery floor as if she were a bus and this my first attempt at taxi-ing! Several times I pretty nearly crashed, too. . . .

Still, she was such a splendid dancer that for the last half-minute of it I positively enjoyed it—that is, I would have if I hadn't had to make a forced landing after all, because when I was trying to "hesitate" I caught my foot in some of the mauve flounces and things of Son's mother as she danced behind us, and nearly brought the lot of us over for a grand finale.

My partner told me she'd danced with hundreds of men who were not nearly so good as I was, even after

half-a-dozen lessons. She said Mr. Grantham ought not to have brought me to *start* at the Thursday show; it wasn't fair on a beginner, for Cecily (this was what she called the little dancing-mistress) had these Thursday evenings for her pupils after they could run alone, so to speak, and so that she could keep her eye on them and see how they got on at real dances when they'd left her. She—my partner—said I ought to arrange for private lessons. And before I knew where I was, there was I saying I'd come to this place every day next week at eleven *ac emma*. You see, I'd been taking duty for a man in our office who was off to Scotland, and I should be on from three to eleven for a week. Which left my mornings clear. So I didn't see why I shouldn't, especially as this girl said she's giving a lot of the lessons to help her friend out, and she'd take me on herself and get me to dance as well as anybody in no time.

All this she told me as we sat out on a very comfortable sort of sofa, right out of the way of everybody at the back of the alcove that she showed me. She told me only that floor belonged to the classes; and the house was let off in floors. She'd a very nice speaking-voice—I thought her a jolly sort of girl altogether. So friendly. Nicer than pretty. I shouldn't call anybody pretty with dark eyes. How could you expect eyes as black and sparkly as hers ever to look soft? She'd probably hate to look soft anyway. But I liked her. So kind to take such a lot of trouble over me.

Funny how easy to talk to, too, I, who've always wondered what fellows find to say to girls at dances, I found myself telling this girl no end of things. . . .

I wonder she wasn't bored stiff, but even when I stopped she asked me questions about fellows I'd known in the Squadron and about how it felt to be with civilians again after all that.

Then (this was after the music had struck up a fox-trot and all the other people were dancing again). she said, "So you're working in the office with Slim Grantham, then? I suppose you like him very much?"

I said everybody liked Slim.

"Men, I suppose," said this girl.

I was rather surprised; I said, "Oh, and women. Rather! Slim gets on with girls better than anybody I know. He understands them."

This girl raised her black half-moons of eyebrows and laughed a little. "Oh? Or don't you think that (like so many men) he *thinks* he understands them?"

I somehow couldn't help wishing that Slim had heard her say this. Bit of a shock! Bit of a change for him, anyhow. . . . But he's a rattling good sort all the same; been awfully decent to me. I said so to this girl. Somehow, I've got a kind of feeling she doesn't think much of old Slim. Funny! I wonder why? Well, if she doesn't like him awfully, she's an exception, that's all.

She said (this was when we were sitting out the second time), "I should have thought you knew as much of girls and things generally as your friend does."

I explained to her what a thundering mistake this was. I told her I could always get on fairly well anywhere with a bunch of fellows, but that I'd scarcely met any girls and that I was awfully nervous of women.

She smiled at me in a jolly friendly little way, (I can't think what induced me to dream she'd ever looked miserable that evening) and she said, "Appearances are against you."

I said (this was when I was putting her fur coat on for her), "If all girls were as sensible and jolly as you are, no fellow would feel nervous and out of it and shy any more."

And when I opened the door of her taxi for her (she wouldn't let anybody see her home), she said, laughingly, "Good-night, nice 'shy' boy."

She meant she didn't believe that tale about my being so shy. It's perfectly true. Funny, though, how bucked I felt because she didn't think me an utter lout—and fancy her imagining I knew as much about everything as Slim does. (Pity she doesn't like Slim; I noticed she hardly looked at him when she said "Good-night," though she smiled ever so sweetly at Miss Yellow-Frock who was standing close to him.)

All the same, I didn't see why the others should have ragged me all the way down to Gloucester Road station about the "scandalous" way I'd been behaving.

"Gee," said Slim (with his hand tucked into Miss Yellow-Frock's muff), "I admire your pace, old horse, once you do start in to monopolise a lady's society!"

"Yes, disgraceful!" laughed Son's mother, pattering along the pavement by my side, "and the best-looking girl in the room, too! For more than an hour those other young men were pestering me to know what had become of the Green Chartreuse girl!"

"The Green Chartreuse—what d'you mean?"

"She was wearing her black-and-silver to-night," explained Son's mother, "but surely you knew who she *was*?"

I didn't. Hadn't tumbled to it until then. This Vogue girl who'd been so decent to me was that very girl Slim had talked to me about. Miss Phyllis Carteret! The girl he'd wangled that introduction to! (perhaps that was what put her so off him?) The girl he'd called "The Beauteous Brunette."

I shouldn't call her *beauteous* . . . But as Son's mother had said, "to some you are, to some you aren't." To me she was just jolly, and fashionably-dressed—but *what* a sensible pal to have for a girl-friend! No nonsense or anything.

I was glad I met her. Jolly glad I should see more of her.

CHAPTER X

KINDNESS ITSELF

"My dear, he's the most *wonderful* Lover. . . . He'll buy her *anything*! Any girl would be happy with anyone who was so *kind*. . . ."

—*Remarks Remembered.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

As Grannie says, "the more you see of David Lewis—"

Yes! I'm getting to call him "David" quite naturally.

"—The more you see of him the more you realise that the man is kindness itself"

The worst of this is that the more you realise a thing the less you seem to think about it.

Or is this very unnatural? Am I in my usual muddle about what I am and what I do?

Three weeks ago—Why! I never dreamt that any man was ever going to be kind enough to make any fuss about me. In fact, I was quite certain no man ever would. And now here I am, almost taking it for granted that a man should think the world of me—which he does—and that he should spoil me and shower presents upon me!

The first present, of course, was my engagement ring. It belonged to his mother, who had left it to him for his future wife when he should have one. The evening that we were engaged, he told me about this, and about how he's been longing, for days and days, to see that ring of his on that little hand of mine.

"Dear me! Dear Nesta's-engagement ring," cried

Grannie, full of emotion as she always is at any mention of her old school-fellow, "Dear me, yes. How well I remember her telling me that poor Edwin, your dear father, had chosen rubies for her because she was 'far above rubies' herself. Far above rubies. Such a beautiful idea of his to give her rubies in her ring and all; such a beautiful ring, too; I remember! . . . Let me have a look at it, may I?" said Grannie, and held out her hand to Mr. Lewis—David, I mean.

I suppose she imagined he would immediately fish that ring out of his waistcoat pocket; I think I thought so too. But here was where my just-accepted fiancé put us in the wrong. He laughed a little and said, "Show it you to-morrow, we will, Mrs. Parry; first thing! I haven't got it with me here to-day. . . . Why! You weren't thinking I'd bring the engagement ring along with me before I even asked the little girl here would she wear it? You didn't suppose I was so sure of her as that? No indeed."

Now this I thought most awfully nice of him.

Am I absurder than any other engaged girl in the things I like? His not having brought the ring with him that evening (when he'd always had it by him!) pleased me more—I mean quite as much as—no, I mean *nearly* as much as the ring itself, that he put on my finger the next day.

It is very beautiful; such big stones going all round and the colour of damson-juice on a silver spoon, and with a lovely old-fashioned setting—the sort of workmanship you don't get nowadays at all, as Grannie says. The dear old thing is so fearfully pleased with it.

That doesn't mean I'm not pleased with it myself!

My ring. Of course I am pleased. I think it is most beautiful. Only——

The only thing is, I never have cared for jewellery—except perhaps for the idea of pearls, which are so lovely. But not for sparkling stones. I always fancy they look so hard and prickly, and that if people didn't know they were jewels, they wouldn't think them prettier than beads or bits of glass. As for diamonds—why not have a necklace made of the lustres off one of Grannie's ancient candlesticks on the drawing-room mantelpiece? Those have just as rainbowy colours in them and are much bigger, as far as that goes, than any diamonds that I've seen.

But of course I could hardly blurt out these opinions to Mr.—to David, when he told me as he kissed my "engagement-finger," that one of these days, he'd put a bit of a diamond or so in a ring, above those rubies of his mother's. He is a dear!

The very day after he'd given me the ring, he brought in another little leather case, and held it in his hand while he made me guess what was in it; watching my face as if I were a child dipping into a bran-pie. You know how excited and rosy and skipping about those little things get, at parties! I believe he expected me to be just as excited as I gave my three guesses; brooch, bangle, charm. . . . As if one would mind so very much which kind of jewellery it was, from the person one was engaged to. . . .

But I don't think I showed I wasn't simply thrilled by this present (it was a pendant on a little gold chain with rubies—more rubies!—strung along it), for when I thanked him he just stroked my hair and beamed at me and said I was not to talk like that; it was himself he was pleasing, indeed, it was a great, great

pleasure to him to be able to give a little present or so to his own dear little sweetheart.

A present or so . . . !

Two days later he sent in as a surprise—one of the most delightful presents that Grannie had ever seen. It was a standing work-basket in wicker ; very large and lined with crimson satin and fitted up with everything you could possibly want for sewing. Scissors of every size, needle cases with every known sort of needle, stilettos, bodkins, thimble, rows of reels of cotton, silks, buttonhole silk, skeins of wool in black, white, and "natural," and a darning in the shape of a wooden mushroom.

"That'll come in useful, I thought, when I get the girl to myself and shut her up with about fourteen pairs of my socks to mend," said my fiancé to me, and my heart suddenly sank as low as if I were married already. But what *am* I talking about—surely when one's married one doesn't feel depressed at the idea of darning socks? Not for a husband as nice as David Lewis, for it was very nice of him to laugh directly afterwards and to put his arm round me and say, "What a shame to tease the little girl about shutting her up to darn socks! You don't suppose that I don't know all that is a thing of the past? I gave the basket for you to sew your own pretty things when, dear. I'm not too benighted to have heard tell of pousseaux, and bottom-drawers, oh, I know all about it!"

I expect he's heard some of the girls at the office talking about that. The first thing they asked me when they heard I was engaged, and after they'd finished gasping over its being to the head of our office himself, was "Are you beginning to get your

things? " As if that were certainly the important part of an engagement, next to the ring. Of course, I could see they thought (like I used to) that Mr. Lewis was far too old to dream of marrying anybody. I know they think that a man of forty ought to be either married or "retired." Especially Mabel, the girl who's engaged herself. But what they all said was, " You're a lucky little thing, you know. You're going to be on velvet all right. He *will* be kind to you! "

His kindness goes on and on. It makes me quite wretched to think that I can do absolutely nothing for him in return, except take that soft grey wool, which I was going to try and knit into a jumper for myself and cast it on to make a waistcoat for him. Perhaps he'll like it as a surprise, but what's a waistcoat compared to what he's always thinking out for me? The day after I said "good-bye" to working at the office any more, he asked me to meet him at lunch, and do a little shopping with him afterwards in the West End. Some little present really *for myself* he wanted to find for me this time; something pretty and yet that I could use every day, and think of him, perhaps. What he wanted was to help him choose a handbag for me.

(I wondered if he'd noticed that my faithful little round black silk one is rather frayed round the top and has lost nearly all the tassel?)

He took me into a shop that simply terrified me. A haughty old gentleman behind a glass counter repeated "Ladies' Handbags!" as if Mr. Lewis had said something to insult him, and then turned away—while my fiancé twinkled at his back and gave me a tiny encouraging wink. The bags were brought;

millions of gorgeous ones. A bag—oh, that bag—in wonderful crocodile leather was the one he evidently wanted me to have. Me! I should have thought only suitable for Queen Mary! It had a determined gold snap, most lovely! And all-gold fittings; mirror, pencil-case, powder box, vinaigrette, and engagement pad. And then, just as if it were not quite sumptuous enough already, if you please! he left it in the shop for them to put a lovely little curly “J” in gold on the outside of it.

I whispered to him as we got out into Bond Street again, “It’s much too good for me!”

He beamed down into my face. Really he seems quite like a young man when he shows his nice teeth and looks so happy. He gave my arm a little squeeze as we stopped at a (much-too-grand-for-me) teashop and said, “Don’t talk nonsense, child. Nothing could be too good for you. I’m so glad you’re pleased though. You do think it’s not a bad bag, don’t you?”

It has just come home and really it is the most magnificent possession I have ever had. The mere smell of the leather makes you think of all the most wonderful shops you’ve ever gazed in at the windows of—or of the lists of wedding presents to some princess. I wish it wouldn’t make all my clothes look so shabby when I take it out—which I only dare do when I’m going anywhere with David. The rest of the time Grannie seems to be admiring it and rubbing up the bright parts and saying “It’s not only such a lovely thing, dearie, but so durable! It’ll last you—why! it will be just as good as it is to-day when you are seventy! . . . David didn’t get that for nothing, either.”

No; that is the worst of it. *All* his presents look as if they cost such a frightening lot. Invisible labels

seem tied to each of them with guineas and *guineas* marking them all. . . .

And when I think that with the money which he so generously squandered on one standing, fitted work-basket, a girl could buy herself *hundreds* of the kind of things she really *likes* !

Just a dozen of those absurd " Eve " hankies in pink, sky and mauve ; a sachet of June roses to put with them ; a tight little bouquet of those Futurist satin flowers to pin to my coat ; a long string of those soap-bubble-coloured shells from Liberty's ; a wee vellum book of Herrick's love-songs ; even chocolates in a gay box that I could keep my ribbons in afterwards—these are the presents that I should adore !

So am I too childish ? Is it *too* horribly ungrateful of me ?

I couldn't tell Mr. Lewis that I should like any of these things. One can't possibly look gift-horses in the mouth and then say one would rather have a donkey-cart. Especially not, when one is an engaged girl.

But now here's the worst of it.

I can't make myself feel as if I were an engaged girl at all.

No ! In spite of the far-above-rubies ring ! In spite of Mr. Lewis coming here every day ! In spite of teas and lunches out ! In spite of being taken with Grannie to the theatre, in a box, if you please ! In spite of the presents—in spite of that bag ! In spite of his calling me "*my own little sweetheart*," and putting arms round and kissing me, as he always does, several times in one visit ! In spite of all this, I still don't feel as if there were anything different about me.

Life goes on rather differently, of course, now that

I haven't to go to the office, and now that some one is here most evenings instead of my just sitting with Grannie and reading to her (or mooning to myself as I've quite, quite left off doing). But I am the same ; not any growner-up-feeling, not any more unsettled (now the first evening's over), just peaceful, just Julia-as-she was. *Ought* I to be ?

Even if I oughtn't, it would be my own fault. For it could not possibly be the fault of my fiancé. Whatever he does, or says, or looks, or thinks, or wishes, or means, one can only come back to Grannie's verdict on him.

He is kindness itself.

CHAPTER XI

JUST FRIENDS

"The man who believes in Platonic friendship is the one who 'didn't know the gun was loaded.'"

—*American Axiom.*

THE BOY'S STORY

SLIM's right. Anybody who chooses to go in and have a try at it can find girl-friends and get "a whale of a time" if he wants to.

Look at me. Look at those mouldy weeks and months when I used to shut myself up alone in my room, mugging up lecture-notes or else wool-gathering instead of getting any sort of a move on. "Get up and get" is the motto, as Slim says, if you're keen on having any sort of time at all. Look how different things are for me now, ever since I barged in to that dancing-show and insisted on making friends—just ripping good pals, with no nonsense of love-making, or anything of course—with the jolliest girl there, Phyllis Carteret.

For she is jolly. Always merry and bright; always laughing, always on the go! Reminds me of the way a reflection from a glass of water can be sent dancing about a room, now here, now there, quick as lightning, never still for a minute. Phyllis would wake anybody up. I tell you she's made no end of a difference in my life ever since I got her round to looking upon me—just ordinary, quiet, stick-in-the-mud me, Jack Smith—as one of the best chums she's had.

Funny in a way that she should care to see such a lot

of a chap like me, who's only just started in to go about and meet anybody at all! Funny that it's my sort of fellow she should take such a lot of trouble over teaching to dance, and that she should ring *me* up at the office when she'd got two seats given to her for some show where a pal of her's was playing, and that it's *me* she should write to about getting up a party for the Grafton Galleries. Me! Must be something in the force of contrast after all.

Anybody would have said from the general look and get-up and ways of her that Slim Grantham or somebody goey and good-looking like that would have been the fellow she'd pick to go about with.

Funny how she never has a good word to say for old Slim! I asked her why, as soon as I began to be really chummy with her. That was at my third private dancing lesson in the big cleared room looking down on to the Cromwell Road. Her friend the little dancing mistress was taking a big Australian soldier for the foxtrot, and Phyllis was taking me. (She'd told me that I had better call her Phyllis as every one else did.) She'd just said to me, "Now, look here, Jack! Don't think of your feet for a minute. Think of the music and your feet will follow it."

"Some people's feet may, but mine have got such a way of falling over themselves still," I told her in spasms to the tune of *K-K-K-Katy*. "Afraid I'm awfully clumsy to-day, Phyllis. I never am as quick at getting the hang of things as Slim is——"

"Oh, Slim," tossed off Phyllis with a little laugh. "Slim is capable of being clumsy enough; hideously clumsy sometimes."

"You don't like him," I said, just as we stopped by

the door. "I know you don't, from the very way you say his name. Why don't you?"

"Like Slim?" took up Phyllis, fanning herself with a sheet of music she'd just taken off the piano. "Why, I don't dislike him. I don't find him very interesting, that's all; everybody can't have the same tastes, can they? and what a good thing!"

"But when I first heard about you and that green Chartreuse frock you wore, I understood he was quite a great friend of yours."

"Oh! At first! Yes. So he was," said Phyllis, in her quick, airy way. "But he very soon died on me."

"Died——?"

"Oh, yes! That's just my word for the way I seem to get tired of people and things sometimes," she told me, laughing. "Sometimes I'm quite fond of some one for a summer, another girl, say; I see lots of her, go shopping with her, like to talk to her; and then—she's done nothing and it's not my fault, but I suddenly find I haven't got a thing more to say to her. Her society's died on me! Same with a frock. It used to suit me awfully; it's the same, not worn out, not out of fashion, but . . . I simply can't wear it. That's like my green Chartreuse frock there's been all that chat about. I shall have to sell it or give it away or something. Things are always dying on me——"

"Oh, I say," I said ruefully. "I shan't like it a bit if I have to 'die' on you before I've had my six lessons?"

She was looking away from me, at the other two who were fox-trotting; her black eyes following her friend's little tripping feet in brocade slippers all worn at the toes with daily work. I caught sight of Phyllis's face in that huge mirror opposite, and for an instant

saw it again as if it were dog-tired and fed-up. . . . Funny, wasn't it? There was nothing of the sort really. The fact is she has one of those faces that have to look sad in repose because they hardly ever are in repose ; always laughing and lighted up. Smiling as usual, she turned to me and said, " Oh ? You, Jack ? No, I don't think I shall get tired of you. You're not that sort. I think you're——" She stopped and said, " Now come along," and took my hand to dance again.

It was after this, and as I was taking her along by Tube to have some lunch at Buzzard's after all her hard work, that I reminded her, " What were you going to say ? You think I'm ? "

" Oh ! " She just laughed teasingly with all her black eyes and white teeth as she sat there next to me.

One of the wings in her hat caught me in the eye ; a queer little hat she wore, looked lop-sided, but that was meant. Quite smart when you got accustomed to its being a bit peculiar and vogue-ish. All her clothes were like that.

I moved out of the way of the wing and said, " Tell me what you were going to say about me."

She laughed. I laughed too ; always do when I'm with her. Don't know what it is, but Phyllis is the sort of girl who " revs you up," makes you feel full of beans ; you can't be dull as long as you're with her, even if you are just talking nonsense about nothing in particular. She's like that.

" Why d'you want to know, Jack ? "

The fact is I did want to know most awfully. Just because she wouldn't tell me, I suppose. If she could be obstinate, so could I. I'm like that. So I fired back, " Why don't you want me to know ? "

"I can't hear a word you say in this racket!" says Phyllis, raising her voice as the train lurched along. "D'you want me to bawl it out before"—she made a funny face as quick as lightning about us—"before a whole tube-full of strange—jahs? Perhaps—I don't promise, Jack! but *perhaps* I will tell you after your next lesson."

But she wouldn't tell me then. Nor the week after, when I was on duty at night and so had the afternoon free to take her out to tea at the New Gallery after seeing that film that she wanted to go to. The day after, we'd a ripping long 'bus-ride out to Wimbledon and a walk all over the Common. First tramp I've had out there *with* anybody since I went with old Tim Harrison before the war. It does make an awful difference having a companion. . . .

But still she wouldn't tell me.

"Don't believe there's anything to tell! Don't think you *know* what you think," I told Phyllis as we said good-night, and, of course, arranged where I was to meet her next day.

For after all it's perfectly natural that when people get on as well as we do they should always find themselves saying, "And when am I going to see you again?" before they leave each other; isn't it? It would have been the same if we'd been both men, instead of her being just the best girl-friend—and—nothing else, that a man ever found for himself. After having had a nice time with any pal, one naturally wants to make sure that the next time will be fairly soon.

So next morning as soon as I came off duty (nothing much on that night, but one never knows what there might be) I went off to meet Phyllis at our favourite

pitch in the Park, where we sat down on two green wooden chairs and ate some chocolates and watched the sea-gulls banking and soaring over the Serpentine. Presently a middle-aged man in a top-hat passed that Phyllis nodded to.

"That's my Uncle. Harry's—I mean my Dad's brother. The other partner of our great and glorious firm of Carteret Brothers, Chartered Accountants," she told me casually.

I saw her Uncle just glance at me as he took off his hat and smiled. That gave me an opening for something I'd been wanting to say for the last fortnight or so.

"Look here. That reminds me, Phyllis. You know how well I've got to know you. But you know I've never seen your father yet."

"Don't suppose he'd interest you. Or you him," said Phyllis airily, tucking into her furs the bunch of ~~gloves~~ bought for her as I came into the Park. "Poor Harry! His one aim in life when he leaves business is to be taken for twenty-eight wherever he goes. So he keeps away from real young men as much as possible. He says they're uninteresting; bumptious. Just because the war's over and they've the right to wear a silver badge, all these lads under twenty-five think they're everybody and have got nothing more to do but throw themselves about and jazz through life until the cows demobilise! That's my fond parent's view of all of 'em, Jack."

"Yes, but look here, he hasn't seen me. No! I don't mean he'd think that I was different. What I mean to say is, he ought really to see that—that it's all right, your being with me."

Phyllis turned to me and jabbed me in the eye as

usual with her feather as she stared at me rather quizzically. "What *are* you trying to say?"

"Why, just this. I'm enjoying seeing such a lot of you and going for these walks and to these matinees and things, and having you to look forward to on the afternoons when I'm off duty and all that. But I'd enjoy it more if your father knew something about the fellow who was seeing a lot of you like this."

Phyllis still looked at me, without saying a word. Some people passing looked at *her*. Most people *did* when we were out, I'd noticed. She certainly is rather striking—effective, I suppose. I've often seen men—even quite distinguished colonel-y sort of men look at her admiringly, and then at me, rather surprised I had such good taste, I daresay. A fellow couldn't help rather liking being seen out with a girl like that, even if he didn't like the girl particularly. Which I do.

I said "I'd feel it was more sort of above-board, and that, if your people had seen me!" and I felt she must think I was a bit old-fash., but I couldn't help that.

She said, lifting her black half-moon eyebrows at me, "Do you mean you'd like me to take you home to Number 99, Carnarvon Crescent, Bayswater, and introduce you solemnly, to my people?"

"Yes! Yes. As a matter of fact I should like that very much."

Funny how I could say that straight out to Phyllis. With any other sort of girl one would have felt that she might have thought one was getting some sort of an idea into one's head. You know, about "seeing father" and an engagement, and that sort of rot. An engagement! Me! On my screw and prospects! Besides, as if there were any thought of that kind of

thing being possible in a friendship like ours, which is so absolutely different. But Phyllis understands. She knows, exactly.

She said quite cheerily, "Oh! So you'd like to meet the whole family? All right; why didn't you say so before? I would have led you to the family mansion days ago, only I thought it would probably bore you to tearless sobs. Most young men—but you certainly aren't much like most young men, are you?"

"Is that what you think of me? Sorry I don't meet requirements."

"I don't mean that, but you can come home to lunch with me now this minute if it appeals to you," said Phyllis carelessly. She jumped up off her chair and looked at her little wrist-watch. "Lunch is at one; mother likes it early. But wait a minute," she laughed. "I suppose it has to be father as well, hasn't it? The fascinating Harry only lunches in the bosom of his family on Sundays, of course. So if you want to be strictly correct, what about coming next Sunday at one?"

"Thank you," said I, determined not to let her rag me out of what I consider the right thing to do. "I shall be very glad to come then, if I may."

"But don't you start being on duty at another time the end of this week? Won't you be working from eleven on?"

"No. Slim Grantham asked me to swop with him for Saturday; so I'll be on night duty then."

Phyllis gave a little curl up of her mouth at the name of Slim, evidently thinking *he* always had everything arranged to suit him. . . .

"Well, but this just suits me, Phyllis! You see I'm free on Sunday until I go on again at three;

so I can come to lunch at your house. Thank you very much."

"For the typical stodgy British Sunday lunch? The classic joint of roast beef! Baked potatoes! Rhubarb tart with custard! Cheese and celery!"

"Well, what's the matter with those?"

"Also the whole family, parents, brothers, school-room party all gathered round the festive board to inspect you! Brave man!" laughed Phyllis as she shook hands and turned. "Got the address? Very well, then. I'll see you—we shall *all* see you at one on Sunday!" And she was off before I could even say "but where shall I see you to-morrow?"

Two whole days until Sunday. . . .

CHAPTER XII

A MOVE ON

"The touch of a vanished hand."

—Tennyson.

THE BOY'S STORY

FUNNY how after all this chat about Sunday I wasn't able to keep that appointment after all!

Something happened in the meantime that's made a good deal of difference to me. I don't mean any immediate difference. But I know it's brought my name up before railway mandarins who otherwise wouldn't have heard anything about me, young Smith of the Military Department at our terminus, for another umpty-two years; if then.

It began with the War Office. Of course, they were demobilising at a great rate at that time and it was a ticklish business in more ways than one. When fellows are stamping their hoofs waiting to get demobbed they don't think of the tremendous work it means for shows like ours. Why, I know I was the same myself, when I was getting out of the army, or I would have been, if I hadn't been on the railway before I joined up, and so had an inkling of what was behind all the hold-ups and so on at a big station. I shan't forget last Saturday night at our place!

In came "special" after "special," often almost touching, and each one carrying its thousand men or so to their own particular dispersal centre. All this on the top of umpteen extra leave trains, movements

of troops in the country itself—not to speak of the ordinary train services carrying civilians backwards and forwards about their business, and taking everything for granted unless anything were ten minutes late. But to get back to the War Office.

As I said, there'd been a good deal of dissatisfaction among the men because they couldn't get whisked back direct to wherever they wanted to go on a sort of magic carpet. At one or two of the stations there had been scenes, and the men had marched themselves off to Whitehall to find out what about it. The less there was of that kind of thing the better. So that night some inspired Transport Officer at headquarters had decided to show us how to do it.

Without consulting anybody, he'd started in to divert trains from where they should arrive normally—we'll call it terminus "A"—to our station, which we'll call terminus "B." I don't know if he thought it was further from Whitehall or if he just wanted to get the men scattered a bit. Scattered, indeed!

Well, having taken Slim's place for duty that night, I was up in the office thinking I shouldn't have anything particular to do and might get quite a lot of sleep between telephone calls, when in rushed young Herrick who was to share the vigil with me.

"I say," he burst out. "What about these specials? Three of them in the last ten minutes, and Johnson's foaming at the mouth about them. Wants to know why the devil you didn't tell him?"

"Tell him what? What specials?" I said. "I've had no orders about any specials. Must be a mistake."

"Well, you can hear 'em now; the soldiers, I mean," Herrick said. "There's about two thousand of them in full kit just got in and trying to push the

refreshment-room walls in, and everything shut up as you know—and what's to be done with 'em? "

As he spoke I heard that sort of low growling across the yard below.

I nipped to the other window.

There they were. . . . Under the half obscured station lights, with some of the air-raid paint still on them, I could see what looked like a sea of dim tossing khaki; it sounded like a sea, too.

Men on leave, men waiting for demobilisation, soldiers out of every crowd there is; no end of Scotsmen, from long distances I expect, with their extra day's leave to get to their homes . . . Poor devils! Many of them must have been four days on the road already, and not so much as a cup of coffee to put inside them—stiff and frozen as they were—I knew enough about that.

I felt as if I were back in the army myself, and the war still on . . . funny how, instead of feeling rotten, I was revved up again as if I were out for some sort of an adventure with my pal Tim Harrison. Tim was just full of initiative; funny how I seemed at that minute to be thinking hard of old Tim at the same time as I was full of what to do about all this; funny! I seemed to know just how old Tim would have handled it.

I dashed back to the telephone. Before I got to it I'd changed my mind about ringing up the War Office first. It was too urgent for that; I wanted something done quick.

Three-quarters of those men losing patience below there wouldn't have got their pay and the rest would have only French money, and the refreshment rooms would be no good to them even if they were open. . . .

And the rush of another incoming train warned me there was no time to lose.

I grabbed that telephone and started in doing unheard of things with it; things I'd no authority for doing, as I knew. Three more of those blessed trains had come in before I so much as took breath. Then I looked up and saw Herrick standing there like a fool—means well, but he's young, that sort of chap.

"Good Heavens, man," I cried, "get a move on. You heard what I said, didn't you? You ought to be half way to 'A' Terminus by now. Get into a taxi and don't come back with less than five thousand pounds in English money, in half an hour."

I saw the refreshment-room lights were going up now. *Bon!* As Herrick disappeared I sprang to the telephone again to tell them about taking French money. . . .

You see, by past midnight that night, when the last theatre-goer had reached home and most of London was comfortably in bed, we had this mob of ten thousand in our terminus, a very mixed mob, feeling themselves ill-used, and ripe for any mischief—and away from their own officers. To make matters worse, the officer who was temporarily in charge, and who did *not* seem to know his duties had given the order that the men were now to go home and to parade again next morning at the station at eight.

Home! In overflowing London, with scarcely a bed to be had at that time, and with half of them from the North? Parade again next morning, after the parading they'd done for the last four years? No wonder they raised a yell that almost lifted the station roof off!

This was as I dashed out of the office, down the

stairs and into the station itself. I knew there were only two things that would quieten those men.

Something to eat, something hot! and their pay. The first was being got ready for them as quick as the scratch staff I'd raked together from a dozen different departments could get it. The second ought to be here in five minutes unless that ass, Herrick, fooled it.

But if the men wrecked the place in the meantime? It looked as if that were coming now unless some one could stop it.

Suddenly I found myself close to the young officer who'd given that rather tactless order.

I said quite shortly, "I say! I'm a railway official here. I think I can keep these chaps quiet, I'll apologise afterwards. If you don't mind" (not that it would have made any difference then if he did mind), "I'm going to speak to them."

I forced my way through, barging against boulders of muddy equipment; the fellows were, of course, loaded up to the eyebrows, as Tim and I had been in our day; with knapsack, muddy boots, shrapnel-spattered tin hats, souvenirs, nondescript brown paper parcels, pioneer axes, rifles with bits of sacking round the muzzles!—and I jumped up on to a station barrow.

"Clear away to that entrance thar!" I shouted, like a word of command. "Your pay's coming."

Only a dozen or so nearest to me could have heard me above all that growling din, but that was enough. The words ran along like rifle fire. Pay! The sea of faces shifted up towards me, me standing on the barrow with the cheek of Old Nick, in my dark suit and no hat on. Tim was reckoned jolly good with the men when we were both in the P.B.I.; he always

said I was all right, but I wasn't up to him. He said I was all right—funny how I remembered it then ! I felt just as if he'd put his hand on my shoulder and kept it there for a second in a way he had. This made me so bucked with myself all of a sudden, that I could have done anything. Before any of those faces could turn away from gaping up at me I went on, "I'm an officer"—none of them would have guessed that this had only been for six months in the R.A.F.—"and a railway official here. If a dozen of you will mount guard at these doors," I shouted, "and bear a hand inside, you'll have something to eat all the quicker. A dozen of you," I rapped out sharply, "I didn't say a hundred. Here, you ! and you ! and you !" I pointed, picking them out and hoping I should be able to keep this up and hold them—it was the rummest feeling, holding them like that !—until I got the thing going.

I heard mutters out of the crowd : "Who's *he* ?"

"That's an officer all right——"

"Says the pay's coming——"

"No parade——"

"Make way for the pay there !"

And as the shout was taken up, "Make way for the pay !" by sheer luck I heard the horn of Herrick's taxi, and the waves of that khaki sea shifted to left and right like the waves of the Red Sea.

The taxi glided up the middle and Herrick and two officers got out ; he'd raised two officers. . . .

Well, I needn't go into details of all the rest. In ten minutes one of the Lost Property offices had been converted into a pay office, and the score of sergeants among themselves were marshalling the men into something like order. I only said one more thing to

them. "French money will be taken at the canteen!" I bawled. And then I sprang down from my barrow.

As I did, I could almost have sworn I felt that friendly hand on my shoulder, like Tim used to put it. That place on my shoulder felt warm, as if from his hand; oh, it's all nonsense, I know. Just imagination. But it was thinking of old man Tim that had sort of helped me, and I still felt bucked, even when I'd legged it back up to my own office—and to the storm-and-a-half that was waiting for me there.

Four fellows, my railway superiors, were raging and fuming and demanding to know where (the something) was Smith.

"Ah! There you are," barked Robinson, who'd got his overcoat collar buttoned up over his pyjamas—he'd evidently come straight from his bed in Ealing, here. "Where've *you* been this half-hour, may I ask? Why weren't you at your post?"

I suddenly thought, "Blast all these chaps." I felt years older and more experienced than the lot of them; I felt like owning the blessed line. I took no notice of Robinson for a minute. I was in for it, so I might as well fiddle the tune out. Neck or nothing—principally neck.

I grabbed the telephone.

"War Office," I called. "That R.T.O.? . . . There are ten thousand troops here, sir . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . We've sent over to borrow their pay from Terminus 'A,' and they are getting it now. . . . Now . . . Yes; given orders that French money is to be taken for their food, sir . . . After that I suppose they are to be allowed to continue their journey?"

I heard a pleasant, lady-like man's voice coming thinly back. "Oh, capital. Thank you very much.

We were wondering what had better be done. Yes! That's just what you ought to have done. Thank you so very much!"

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye." I hung up the receiver again. My work was finished.

As meek as Moses I turned to the others. I knew I was in for it now. To-morrow would probably see me sacked for exceeding my duty. "Couldn't be helped." I said politely to Robinson. "I beg your pardon, sir, for interrupting you. I think all's straight now; what were you asking me?"

Then the storm-and-a-half broke. . . .

There was absolutely no doubt I deserved what they said. No doubt I had scandalously exceeded my authority, taken things upon myself as if I were a manager. But . . .

Ten thousand men were safely fixed up, and a nasty lot of trouble had been avoided at both Whitehall and the termini. Old Tim would have enjoyed the fun of it, I thought.

* * * * *

At eleven o'clock on the Sunday morning, Slim lounged in. Found me busy writing. I had to get out a report—and it ran pretty long! of what had happened the night before. I'd been assured that this report would be nearly certain to mean the sack straight away.

But even while Robinson and the others were saying so, I'd been making up my mind to something different. It shouldn't mean the sack. It should mean things getting a lot better instead of worse for me, Jack Smith. Or, if it meant my leaving this moth-eaten line with all these old ladies at the head of affairs

I'd see that somehow—somehow I'd get a better job than this. Handling that situation last night—even if it hadn't been a big thing really, it had given me a taste for getting a bit of authority instead of being a mere understrapper for years and years, on just enough to keep me going, all by myself. A fellow can't go on living as I'd been living since the Armistice broke out. A fellow's got to have position; money. Can't do without money—how can he be anybody, or see anybody, or marry anybody on very little more than two quid a week? I was fed up with things as they were. . . . They'd *got* to alter. . . .

"Hullo, old horse," said Slim, putting down his hat, "it's not often I see you working up to the last minute like this."

I couldn't be bothered with Slim just then. Slim isn't dependent on this line; he's only here *pro tem.*; going back to something quite good in Canada.

"I'm staying on to-day; I shall be here till the afternoon, I expect," I said to him, shortly. Then I remembered that appointment for one o'clock. I saw Slim glance above the desk and twist that jester's face of his as I leant over to the telephone and got the Carteret's number, then pull himself quickly together to pretend he hadn't taken any notice.

I left a telephone-message to say I was awfully sorry I couldn't lunch, then I went on with that report of all those enormities I'd committed last night.

So that was why I didn't meet Phyllis's father that Sunday. A week later I was asked to 99 (their house) to dinner. And the first thing her father said when I was shown in, was a bit of a surprise to me.

"Ah, yes," Mr. Carteret said, with a very sharp

black-eyed glance at me, "you're the young man who's the hero of that affair at Terminus 'A.' "

Up to then I'd been pretty pleased with myself for getting a move on that night. But what a dash, silly way of putting things! A "hero" . . . Hardly one's idea. And then to think of flying, and things chaps have done . . . like Tim and lots and lots of them that one's watched and known. . . . It put me dead off myself and him and everybody. Put my back up for a minute.

Afterwards I came to see that Mr. Carteret's version was going to be pretty useful to me. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

NO INTENTION

"All men are born dogs in the manger."
—*Platitude.*

THE BOY'S STORY

I CAN give you my word about one thing I hadn't the very faintest idea of getting engaged to Phyllis Carteret until the day before I went and did it.

That was a month or so after the affair at Terminus "A.", and, of course, after my promotion came through.

For I did get my promotion. I'd made up my mind that I'd have to have it. It was that or the sack; and my luck was in. Huge luck for me that they'd put a new man in at the head of our line, and that, as he said to me when I reported to him, he didn't care what was "usually done"; he wanted the men he thought could do the jobs in those jobs.

My new job meant a certain amount of office routine still, but quite a lot of travelling up and down the line as well, and also a rise to six quid a week. Six! . . . I felt a millionaire for days. . . .

But was it that that made me change my mind about Phyllis? It helped, of course. . . . So, in a way, did the talk I had with Slim Grantham. This was in the office just before I came off duty one evening. I was putting on my gloves and looking round for the clothes-brush. I'd got a rub of plaster on my new trousers.

"Here, let me give you a brush behind," Slim said. "What was the peace-time price o' these, by Jove?"

I told him.

That new suit had certainly not been cheap; but if it had cost twice as much I should have got it. I was as fed-up with my old "civvies" as I'd been with the rest of my life. That overcoat of mine had been a disgrace; a wonder any girl would let herself be seen with me in it! Some wouldn't have, I dare say; but Phyllis was nice in that way, always. I jolly well meant to be well turned out now, if it were only on her account; but clothes do make a difference to a man's whole prospects. Everybody notices clothes, whether they think they do or not. I've found that out already,

Slim grinned as he moved round to brush the front of me, and rattled on in a way that had begun to get on my nerves a bit. "For the journey, the bridegroom was attired," brush, brush, brush, "in an expensive navy-blue serge guaranteed to show up every speck of railway car dust," brush, brush. "Other portions of his trousseau were on the rack of the first-class compartment. (Salary being now over two hundred a year, first-class travelling.) Must stick your handkerchief up your sleeve, though, old horse. Spoils the breast. The heather tie by Mr. Wing—stand still, can't you?—harmonised exactly with the confetti," brush, brush, brush, "contained in the turn-up of his trousers——" he burred on, exactly like an ostler hissing as he grooms a horse.

Of course I ought not to have turned stuffy about this idiotic burling of old Slim's, but, as I say, it had got on my nerves. I dare say it's all that kind of thing

that put Phyllis so dead off him when she started in by liking him.

"You're always dressy enough yourself," I told him, glancing down at his waisted coat and glimpse of silk shirt. "I don't see what there is in my getting some new clothes to make a song about."

"I wasn't singing. Just this charming speaking-voice of mine," Slim said (very Canadian). "But you know you're a *très* funny old horse——"

"How, 'funny'?"

"Just the same as you always were. You haven't changed a little bit after all these big changes. Here I go and launch you into the giddy vortex, primrose path touch, hoping you'll do me credit with the sex and be a success," Slim said, standing up straight again and looking at me, "and weeks later you're as you were. Plus one girl. *One!* They always do say the pleasures of solitude are nothing until you've some one to talk to them about. But aren't there any other oysters in the stew? To talk to? No?"

Here I'm afraid I gave myself away. "If you mean Miss Carteret——"

"What?" shouted Slim. "Haven't you got to calling her 'Phyllis' yet? . . . *Snail!*"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, I mean you do after all see as much of her as any fiancé could wish! Where were you Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, night? Calling her Miss Carteret. When you aren't with the Great Intermediate Railway Company, you're with this one girl——"

"I like that from you," I said, nettled. "Haven't you done the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday touch?"

What price that girl in the yellow frock? But do I start in to congratulate *you*?"

"Better congratulate *her*," Slim said serenely, putting down the brush and taking out that cigarette-case. "She's engaged all right. Engaged to a chap in Shanghai."

"And you're having a flirtation with an engaged girl?"

"Ah, say not so," from Slim, as cool as a cucumber. "I haven't been near her for a week. For if you're going to have the same face next you for ever in tubes, taxis, tea-shops, theatres, music-halls and wherever you go to after you've finished your day's work in this vale of tears, you might as well— Why, dash it! I reckon you might as well be married and done for! As you seem to be prac——"

"Rot, man."

"Well, what does it look like?" Slim called after me good humouredly as I turned to the door. "Ask yourself. And give my salaams to 'Miss Carteret' presently—of course I mean *if* you see her. Good-night!"

"Good-night," I said, and went off. I had to call at the box-office of the Ambassadors to see if they'd kept those two seats. . . . Of course Phyllis was keeping the evening for me.

As I went along on the top of the bus I did a good bit of thinking—about myself and Phyllis.

So that was how it struck Slim? That I'd been going on as if I were engaged, or going to be engaged to her? I wondered whether it had struck other people in the same way? Not Phyllis herself; I was sure of that. But her people? The other people whom I'd met at 99? Did they all think that this

talk of being "just friends" was all very well, but that I'd have liked something more if I could have got it?

Of course all that would have been settled for them by my being just Young Nobody on the railways on about four pence a year, and nothing to ask anybody to get engaged on. . . .

But now that my prospects looked so different? I was still very full of my luck and my promotion, of course. What difference might they make here? Of course, as far as *they* went, they were enough for a start, supposing I were getting engaged. . . .

I saw that Slim was right in one thing. I was the same stick-in-the-mud old horse, and Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday with a girl I liked seemed to me a better sort of way of going on than trying a different girl for every day in the week. Six on a string was Slim's idea of enjoyment. Not mine. I'd come to a conclusion that may seem odd to you; the conclusion that *I should never really like girls.*

Fact. Not girls *as* girls and in the lump, as most fellows of my age seemed to like them. I'd always be "the same, plus one girl." A one-girl man.

Then a light came to me.

Why shouldn't I be supposed to want Phyllis for that "one girl"?

When I thought of the others at the dancing-class—well, I shouldn't have really wanted to meet any of them seven days a week. Nor any of the girls I'd seen at the Dug-out, or at 99. Phyllis was the pick of the whole bunch.

(I suppose when a man says his sweetheart is the best little girl in the wide, wide world he can only mean that. The best little girl he's *seen*.)

Phyllis certainly was splendid, so jolly, so full of vim, so smart. So exactly what was wanted by a slowish chap like me. Not slow at my job, perhaps, nor with other men. But slow, slow with women. Slim saw that; I saw it myself. Phyllis must see it; yet she seemed not to mind it! I was sure no other girl would get on with me like Phyllis did. . . .

Not that she'd look at me in *that* way. . . . That would be too much to expect. I wondered what on earth she'd say if I asked her.

Turn me down, but kindly, for she did like me. Say I mustn't see her?

That would be awful. Fancy life without Phyllis again, back to the old loneliness! For I'd never get another girl friend. I knew I shouldn't. I'm like that.

Perhaps better just let things stay exactly as they were, I thought rather anxiously. . . . Funny what a little thing it took to jerk me away from *that*.

At the Ambassadors I found Phyllis herself already in the vestibule, looking topping in her black wrap with big silver roses. She'd secured the tickets; she's always on the spot about those things. A man was lifting his hat to her as he turned away; a man I'd met at their house.

Suddenly I realised another thing. Lots of men did go to 99. Phyllis was always meeting men. Supposing she got engaged to one of those others?

Nothing was more likely, after all.

Phyllis engaged, and not to me. . . . Good Lord, how I'd loathe it! . . .

CHAPTER XIV

A SIGH FOR THE OFFICE

"Gone are the days when my heart was light and gay."
—*Negro Melody.*

THE GIRL'S STORY

Is anything the matter with me?

Is the spring weather upsetting me? Or am I going to be ill?

Or is it just that I'm an ungrateful little beast to—to—people who are kindness itself?

I ought to be perfectly happy. I know I ought. It's selfish and silly not to be. Anyhow, I ought to *look* it. . . . I thought I did, at any rate, not show I wasn't.

But this Sunday afternoon, when I went down into our big basement to fetch another jar for the tulips that David had brought for me, I heard something that made me rather ashamed of myself. Margaret, our Welsh maid, was talking to a visitor she'd got in the front kitchen; somebody's cook from near home who had always quarrelled fearfully with our Margaret but who rushed to meet her the second they were both in England together. You know what Welsh people are like: they'd rather have blazing rows with each other and then make it up in tears than live peacefully with the most amiable Saxons. And you know how impossible it is not to overhear every word that's said in clear-out Carnarvonshire accents over kitchen tea when the maids are enjoying themselves!

This was the scrap of conversation that made me feel rather ashamed.

The visitor's voice: "I saw that little Miss Julia when I was coming down the steps. Dear me, she has gone to look sad, too!"

Margaret's voice: "Tut, girl!" (to rhyme with "put").

The visitor's voice: "Indeed, she was. Sorry I was to see the little thing looking so bad, so wist—ful. She——"

I shut the pantry door loudly and ran upstairs again, feeling annoyed that I hadn't managed to keep my own silly feelings out of my face.

For the last week or more I'd certainly been in the dumps: missing something most awfully. *Missing!* But what was there to miss, considering there hadn't been anything in my life since we've lived in London?—until I got engaged, of course.

Only an occasional stroll down Oxford Street to look in at Selfridge's window with Grannie; only a brisk walk sometimes in the Park when I'd got a bad longing for green grass and fresh air about me; only the treat of a concert at the Albert Hall. . . .

And, of course, there was going to the office. *Ah!* it must be that, I realised suddenly.

Yes. It was the funny old office that I missed so much.

Because even that had been a change from the everlasting old house.

Ever since I left the office I've scarcely left the house—except for house-shopping. Literally I've talked to nobody except Grannie and David Lewis, which means I haven't exchanged a word with anybody of my own age. No! I am not trying to make

out that my fiancé is the same age as my grandmother. But he is twenty-seven years older than me! And sometimes I do feel I'm bursting to talk again to somebody quite silly and not long out of their teens. Just for a change. At the office the very oldest of the girls (Mabel the engaged one) was only twenty-four. Her fiancé will be twenty-seven in June. . . .

I can't help feeling that in a way it would be jolly if David Lewis were only as old as that. (Or am I a baby-snatcher?) I can't help this great big wish to see about me some hairs without a single grey one and some faces that are quite smooth and smiley and *un-sensible*!

I do, I certainly do miss the girls at the office! And I do miss having something definite to take me out every morning, away from the rooms "being done" and the laundry getting put away and the "*surely there's a tea-cloth short here, Margaret,*" and the "*did you complain about that fish from Melton's.*" and all the rest of those tiny domestic fusses that women are supposed to go on living in the middle of and liking, to the end of their days! As for me, miss getting work done that *isn't* just rings on curtains, or darning up those little places on that table-napkin, or polishing . . .

Horribly I miss the dear old office!

Most girls nowadays have gone out to work in some sort of office. . . . I wonder if many of them feel as I do when they have to marry and leave their particular office? What about some of those pretty, rather wistful-looking photographs one sees in the *Daily Sketch* every day—"Miss Violet Carbon" or "*Miss Onota Pelman to wed,*" and, of course, "*to*

give up going to the office " ? Do they mind as badly as I do ?

Or am I the only one ?

Perhaps most girls stay at the office until the very last day or so before the wedding ? That wouldn't be so bad, I dare say. What I seem to mind is being in this sort of hiatus. Not at the office any more, and not yet married. No house of my own to run, and nothing much to do (apart from going out with David Lewis) except talk to Grannie and arrange that beautiful standing workbasket and look at That Bag ; that gorgeous, crocodile-leather, Russian violet-coloured satin-lined, gold-fitted, bemonogrammed handbag that my fiancé gave me. That's all. . . . Why ! I should feel like begging David, to let me go back to the office at no salary for the rest of my being engaged to him, only that the office itself (he told me) is closing down. On Tuesday there will be no more of that office ! . . . Monday would be my last chance of ever seeing the darling old office and the girls again.

I must, I will look in at tea-time on Monday. I'll take That Bag and go then.

(Later).

The girls were all fearfully impressed by That Bag. But they all said they'd be " frightened to use it," which is so much what I feel myself.

It was heavenly going in there again all among the typewriters and the green electric light shades and sitting on the table by the window and having tea out of one of those delightful old white cups with the jig-saw rim and *Petit Beurre* biscuits in the saucer with some of the milk slopped over them. How was it that I hardly knew what a happy time I was enjoy-

ing really, all the time that I'd worked in that pet of an office? Years and years it seemed since I'd been there. Those were the days! And only now did I realise how perfectly ripping it was to see Mabel's and Ethel's and Dorothy's pretty blouses and hairs again, and how amusing to hear them talking nonsense, and how badly I had missed them!

I don't think they'd had time to miss me. Dorothy was full of the new dancing-class that she had joined since I saw her. "Why don't you come, kiddie?" she said to me. "Ethel's going to."

A dancing-class!

"What's it like?" I asked, feeling out of everything.

"It's over the Cromwell Road," Dorothy said. "Ever so jolly. A great big front room all mirrors and gilding, and a lovely floor. Two awfully nice girls teach. One's got a bush of frizzy hair all bobbed—they call her O-Cedar Mop. Then there's a Miss Carteret, who's been teaching there lately. She always comes in with a great tall boy, with nice eyes. Smith, his name is," chattered Dorothy. "We all think it's a romance and that they're going to get engaged. . . . It is fun watching people. All sorts you'd meet there. Australians—they *can* dance! . . . Jolly music, too. Do come!"

As if I shouldn't have loved it!

Even a dancing-class to go to would have made just all the difference to me. . . .

"But I should never be allowed—I mean they wouldn't understand my wanting to go. An engaged girl and all that——"

Ethel, the girl who has such a good time, said firmly, "I always knew being engaged must be mouldy."

Mabel (the engaged) threw up her chin and said, "Oh, thank you! Not so mouldy, I can assure you. Mine doesn't mind how much we go to dances; he's got a theory that the people whose steps go best together, dancing, are the ones who'd get on, married."

"Opens up a train of ideas, that," said Ethel, gazing out of the window at the chimney-pots of Westminster. "Take care I don't try and dance him away from you on Saturday week!"

"Oh, that reminds me. I haven't asked Julia yet," said Mabel, turning to me as I gathered up my gloves and That Bag to depart out of this atmosphere of office dust and carbons and tea and cheery chatter.

"Coming to our party on Saturday week, kid, aren't you? It's a dancing tea at our house at Neasden, and our boys say it's got to be some sort of fancy dress because their khaki is dropping off them in strips and they can't really rely on their civvies. Dorothy'll bring some t'rrific dancers with her from her Cromwell Road place; oh, we'll see you have all the partners you want. Tall boys and nice eyes and everything!" Mabel laughed encouragingly. "Wear your hair down and be '*a little cottage girl, she was eight years old, she said.*' We aren't sending out any proper invitations this time. Just say you'll come. You must. Mr. Lewis will bring you, I know, if you ask him prettily. That's quite settled."

They all took that as such a matter of course that I did too.

I looked forward to that party very much indeed.

CHAPTER XV

"CAU' YR DRWS!"*

"Youth is full of sport,
Age's breath is short."

—*Shakespeare.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

QUITE gaily that evening I told Grannie and David Lewis that I'd just been given an invitation that was going to be *such* fun!

The mere idea of it had chased away the silly depression which had made Margaret's friend imagine that I looked "wistful." I was chattering away, about fancy dress and what I could wear and what David might go as, so hard that for some moments I never noticed that Grannie and my fiancé were both looking—well, uninterested—uncomfortable—fidgety.

I stopped as I saw it.

Then Mr. Lewis said, "Well! It's very kind of these people to ask me, I'm sure. But . . . well, well! I'm afraid my dancing days are over."

I said, "Oh! Why, people's grandfathers go and dance nowadays like anything!"

"Yes? I never was much of a dancer myself at the best of times."

"But, David, at dances lots of people like looking on."

"Do they, my dear?" He laughed, but there was

* Shut the door. (Welsh.)

a look in his eyes that made me see I'd said the wrong thing somehow.

So, to make up for that, I put my hand on his coat-sleeve and said, "Oh! And I was so hoping you'd come too!"

Here Grannie lifted her neat grey head from her knitting and looked at me from the other side of the hearthrug. "But, Julia, my dear child," she put in, "you wouldn't dream of wishing to go to a party of any sort *without* David, *would* you, dearie?"

She said it quite gently, but at the same time there was a dash of shocked reproach in her voice. I saw that she had suddenly been faced with an idea that was perfectly terrible to her. For an engaged girl to *think* of going anywhere, unaccompanied by the man to whom she was engaged! Mabel often committed this crime, I knew, before her fiancé got demobilised. Mabel said that he himself said there was no reason that, just because he was kept kicking his heels in France, his girl should get her to a nunnery as far as dances and theatres and things went. And that he preferred getting cheery letters about which were the best shows on in town that they could go to together, afterwards—to melancholy notes about how dull she was without him. Of course the ideas of Mabel and her set always seem rather unconventional to me, but Grannie's views are at the opposite pole. I'm sure that "in Queen Victoria's golden days" she no more thought she could go anywhere without Grandpapa and the chaperone than that engaged people would ever, say, fly from Hendon to Paris together for an outing. As for "poor Edwin," David's father, I expect he would have fainted away into one crumple of peg-top trousers and side-whiskers at the

mere idea of behaving like Mabel's fiancé to "poor dear Nesta," who was far above rubies, and whose own beautiful rubies I was wearing on my engagement finger at that very minute. To Grannie these people were still much more real and alive and grown-up than "her little Julia," who was engaged to "Nesta's boy." . . . Only . . . somehow . . . it made me feel all shut up, and shut in, by churchyard walls with big slate grave-slabs on every side of me.

Or was I morbid?

I only said, "Oh, no, Grannie. If David won't—if David doesn't care to come, of course I can explain to Mabel. . . ."

But here David slipped one hand into my arm as I sat on the fender-stool near his chair, and with the other hand turned up my chin to make me look into his face. "Did the little girl want so much to go to the party?" he said in his kindest voice. "Well, now, look here; let us see what is to be done about it. You don't think I'd want to stop any pleasure of yours, little woman?"

Grannie, reproachfully, "I am sure, David, that nobody in this world could ever think *that*!"

"Nothing I'd like more than to see you enjoying yourself," went on David, squeezing my arm. "The only thing is I want you to be with nice people always; the right sort of people for my little girl, eh? Now, who are these people that are giving this party?"

"Why, David, you know Mabel quite well! Mabel Henshawe at the office."

David murmured that knowing a girl at the office was hardly the same thing as being on friendly terms with her in her own home and with her family. . .

What *was* her family? . . . Miss Henshawe; yes, rather giggley at times . . . dressed a little showily, didn't she? Still, no doubt she was a nice girl enough in her way. . . .

And then David made a suggestion.

Why not ask this Miss Henshawe and her fiancé to tea here, in Mrs. Parry's house, before committing ourselves to going to the Henshawes? Have a look at them first from the point of view of social intercourse? Rather more satisfactory, David thought?

Grannie thought so too.

So I wrote. Mabel answered that she and "Roderick" would be delighted to come.

Ever so pleased, that afternoon I made our old-fashioned dining-room look as pretty as possible with David's tulips and narcissus, and I got ready a real Carnarvonshire sort of tea. Butter from home, home-made bread and fish-paste, and a jar of lemon-cheese. Best of all, there were the light-cakes made by Margaret (who was in a regular flutter of joy at having "company"; strangers, too! to tea). Piles of the proper Welsh light-cakes, fat, hot, rich! Golden and tawny-brown as the clumps of wallflower that grow out of Carnarvon town-walls! scented just like those wallflowers when the hot spring sun melts the snow from our mountain-range!

Oh, I thought it would be such a lovely tea, and everybody would be sure to enjoy themselves. At four o'clock, when Mabel and her party arrived, I was as pleased as if they'd been the sister and brothers that I'd never had. With their bright faces and clear gay voices they seemed to me, as they trooped into our drawing-room, like a big burst of sunlight shining out over a bleak landscape.

Or am I exaggerating, as usual?

Anyhow, they came. And when they went I thought it had been such a lovely, cheery, amusing, friendly, jolly sort of visit—such a really *successful* little afternoon!

* * * * *

Five minutes after they'd all gone again I realised that this was quite wrong and that I'd made a fearful mistake.

For here follow a few extracts from the conversation that took place in the drawing-room, after I, flushed and exhausted but quite happy, had run upstairs again.

First:

GRANNIE: I thought, dearie, that you had only asked two people to tea? How was it that this Miss Henshawe's brothers joined the party uninvited, Julia dear?

Then MYSELF (*apologetically*): Oh, Grannie, you see, it was only just because they had that minute been demobilised and come home! I thought it was rather nice of her to bring them, too? Nicer than not coming herself so as to stay with them?

GRANNIE (*knitting*): H'm. I think they took things just a little for granted by coming to a house where they were not known, dear child?

MYSELF: They'd been serving four years, Grannie! And—and surely Germans billeted in our houses would have taken things much more for granted! I mean—I mean if people like Mabel's brothers and all those young men hadn't been there to fight them off?

DAVID: Oh, no doubt. All these young fellows have done splendidly. Everybody admits that. Only—what do those two, now, intend to do now that they are out of the Army? They didn't seem to have much idea, nor to be very keen on finding any work for a month!

MYSELF: I suppose some people would think all soldiers had deserved a holiday.

DAVID: Very different from a young man I was hearing of the other day at my Club. A big railway-man I know was talking about this young fellow. Now he was a soldier, too. Royal Air Force, I believe. But the minute he was out of it, back he came again to his job. And most splendid work he's been doing on the Great Intermediate Railways. Why, the other night when there was some disturbance among the troops at the terminus, this young railway official, this young fellow, this mere boy of twenty-one, took hold and, practically single-handed, stopped what looked like going to be a riot. They were talking of it all over the Company. That's the way to get on, now, now wasn't that a fine thing?

MYSELF (*dreadfully uninterested in this young railway official that I'd never seen*): Yes, splendid.

DAVID: But this red-haired young Henshawe, just preparing to do nothing whatsoever for weeks! Now, I don't think that's the spirit. Surely there's something useful he could do for his country, not just gadding about?

GRANNIE: And what's this Jazz-roll they were talk-
about, Julia? I couldn't make out if it
were something to eat or something they do?
Such very odd things they seem to have in
the way of amusement now-a-days.

DAVID: Yes, what, exactly, is a Jazz-roll? And
about the band for their dance—what *was*
Miss Henshawe saying about her sailor
brother blacking his face to be like the nigger
who used to walk up and down the supper-
room singing in the old days at Ciro's?
Ciro's! . . . I never was there, of course, but
things one heard. . . . Rather a queer place,
I should think. Well! I hope the Hen-
shawe's parties wouldn't be anything of *that*
sort! . . . How many brothers has she got,
my dear?

MYSELF: Three more besides the two who came here.

DAVID: Dear'me. They all dance, I daresay. Well,
well.

Pause.

[*Stage directions à la that funny old Bernard Shaw long ago. GRANNIE knitting and dropping heaps of stitches then I knew I should have to pick up for her presently. DAVID leaning up against the mantelpiece like a husband. MYSELF moving about the room, a little disconsolately making up the cushions and straightening the anti-macassars that had been disarranged by Mabel, her fiancé, and her brothers*].

Again:

GRANNIE: I always think girls look ever so much better
when they dress a little quietly, and neatly.

MYSELF: Grannie! You didn't think Mabel was
loudly dressed?

GRANNIE: Oh, perhaps not, dear. But I noticed that she had forgotten to curl the feather in her hat before she came out; it looked dreadfully untidy, I thought.

MYSELF: But that was meant! That was a "glycerined" feather!

GRANNIE: Dear me; very ugly fashions they seem to have in these days. . . .

Pause.

[*Stage directions as before. GRANNIE struggling with a dropped stitch. MYSELF smoothing a mat on the occasional table. DAVID quietly watching everything I did.*]

DAVID: Well, my little girl? And these are the young people you think so interesting?

MYSELF: Oh, I don't know about their being specially interesting, David . . . they're just ordinary, I suppose . . . just like most young people one sees about . . . having a good time and all that sort of thing. . . .

DAVID: Is that it? Well! . . . Well, if you still very much want to go to this party of theirs, my dear little girl, I'll take you, certainly. . . .

If I wanted to! As if anybody on earth could possibly want to go to anything that had been talked about as Grannie and David Lewis had just been talking about our guests! I looked from Grannie to him. At that moment they seemed to me exactly the same age. The dainty little old lady of sixty-seven, primly busy with her knitting, and the solid kindly man of forty—something standing in front of the fire—they seemed to me just the same number of years older than I was. *Hundreds* of years older than

I or the Henshawes or any of their friends who were going to be at that dancing-tea on Saturday.

In a small voice I heard myself say, "Oh . . . I don't know that I really want to go so very much. I'd just as soon stay away. . . ."

"Better so, perhaps," said Grannie to her knitting. David Lewis said, "Please yourself, my dear, you know."

Yes, as if anything could please one that had been pulled to pieces and discussed in a voice like that! Oh, I couldn't go.

I said again quite firmly, "I don't want to go." My own words seemed to me to shut a door.

A door that had been opening, I thought, to show a bright glimpse of the outer world with other people who were as young as myself and who laughed and sang and danced and enjoyed life and who called to me to come out and play with them.

It shut that door, leaving me on the other side alone with Grannie and David Lewis.

CHAPTER XVI

LIFE'S VITAGRAPH

"And the flickering shadows softly come and go."
—*Song.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

I THINK it was because he wanted to show me that he wasn't trying to keep me shut up in the house without seeing any young people that David Lewis (who had an appointment at some man's house later the same evening), took me for that walk in the Park yesterday.

That odd, rather frightening walk. . . . That extraordinary walk . . . !

Not that anything extraordinary *happened*. Nothing did. We just walked in through the Marble Arch and past the War Shrine with its wreaths and flower-bunches ; it was a lovely spring evening with the sky all delicate mauve above the trees and primrose-colour below, through the budding branches, and the band was playing, and every path and every bench and every chair on the grass was full of people : I had never before seen the Park so packed.

Now the "extraordinary" thing was this—that in the midst of these masses of people passing me, moving beside me, touching me, with a stream-like flowing and eddying of dark or light figures and a speckle of faces like the pink dot of those sweets called "Hundreds-and-Thousands" that we scatter over a trifle—in the thick of all this I felt myself utterly *alone*.

Far more alone than in those days before I was engaged to be married.

All those people. . . . What was it that made them seem so queer and unreal (to me)? Something was lacking about all of them. I'd read in some book that everything that is, has three "dimensions"; length, breadth, and depth. Ah, that was it; this busy scene had only two dimensions for me; it had no depth, it was flat, flat as a printed page spread out for me to read. All these people. . . . They were no more *there* (to me) than if they'd been the picture of a London crowd seen on the Vitagraph. I looked at them as if I were apart in the audience. As for David Lewis, close beside me and holding my arm to pilot me through that crowd! he wasn't there either. He too might have been just a bit of that Vitagraph show; say the rather heavily-built man in an overcoat who so often gets into the foreground of a film-picture and blots out the view of the Guards' march past or whatever it is. To anyone in the crowd who happened to notice us I suppose he was a solid, prosperous, kindly-looking fellow who was taking such care of the rather small young girl in the purple hat; lucky girl. . . . To me he'd become a shadow, a stranger. Tucked under his arm I walked by his side feeling as if I were all by myself. I *was* by myself. In all that seething, humming, laughing, murmuring throng, I was the one solitary walker.

Or am I *not* the only young girl who, looking to outsiders, well-escorted and well-content, has felt that she was moving absolutely alone through a crowd?

Presently I found myself glancing with an odd interest at the pink blurs that seemed like "Hundreds-

and-Thousands," but that actually were human faces of men and women.

I thought "each of these has a name that I shall never know. Each of these has a home somewhere; a life-story. Is it a gay romance? A tragedy?" I wondered; "Are any of these like me; lonely? Do any of these, walking with sweetheart or friend, feel all the same that they are solitary watchers at a puppet-show? This dark-eyed girl, this one with the Australian soldier's arm about her waist—does she too feel as if he were not there at all? Those other lovers sitting on the bench over there, holding each other by the hand—are their thoughts millions of miles away from each other? Is each dreaming in silence of an ideal that he and she will never in this world see? Perhaps the dream-boy holds her heart; but her hand is clasped by the young man whom she happened to meet first, the second-best boy that she will marry. . . ."

Here I broke off, thinking "there's a cheerful thought!" and, aloud, I made some quite ordinary answer to the last remark of my fiancé, who, of course, was chatting away pleasantly to me all this time.

In my heart I was meditating, "Surely it's better to have *somebody* than not to have anybody at all?"

And I began picking out of the crowd those that weren't walking with anybody. . . .

There were plenty of those; soldiers and young men as well as girls and women. Did I catch a glimpse of aching wistfulness in their faces under the lights as they came towards me, passed as shapes hurriedly seen, and disappeared, not to be seen again by me?

Were they all out to seek, hoping against hope that they might some day find that Dream-Boy, that Dream-Girl who would take loneliness away for ever, once they met ?

Or was that all my silly fancy ?

Or, again, *was* it true enough ?

This evening it seemed to me a tragic truth, and that the Park with its mockingly gay music was simply full of people who by some chance had never happened upon someone who could love them and whom they in turn could love. Yet, somewhere in the world—perhaps not so far away ! perhaps walking in another part of this very Park ! there might be this someone, made for them, born to be their comrade and delight ! Missing life, as long as he missed her and she never knew him. . . .

* * * *

There rose before me a vision of not only Hyde Park but of all the Parks and pleasure grounds of all the cities of Europe, of the civilised world ; Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, New York. . . .

These seemed to melt together into one great place that stretched away to horizons further than I could imagine, and the air above it pulsed and thrilled with music, mocking and gay. And everywhere I saw faces. As far as the eye could reach, growing smaller and smaller to a distant blur of colour like flowers of a giant flower-bed thick with blossoms, I could see those faces, faces, faces. . . . Hundreds and thousands of faces of girls and men ! And all of them were wistful, hungry with longing. All of them showed cheated, eager, expectant eyes of

blue or brown; looking, looking, looking for someone. . . .

For these were the unloved lovers of the world; sweethearts unmet.

* * * *

"Well! And what is my little girl thinking about now?" David's brisk kindly voice seemed to burst out in my ear all of a sudden. "You haven't said a word since we took this path; a penny for your thoughts!"

"Oh! I don't think I was thinking about anything in particular, David. Just watching all these people go by."

"Yes; any number of people about to-night, aren't there? It's this fine spring weather that's tempted them out."

(He had said this twice already since we came into the Park.)

"I thought it would be a little treat for you to come out and have a look round," continued my fiancé with his little squeeze to my arm, "instead of just sitting indoors there alone with dear old Mrs. Parry till bedtime, since I've got this man to see. Now, what's the time?" He stopped to look at his watch. "Ah, no hurry. We can have another ten minutes, enjoying ourselves. . . . And then, do you know what I am going to do? See if I can find a nice taxi and send my little girl all the way home in it. Bus? Tut, no. We'll get a taxi in Oxford Street."

We got the taxi; David putting me in as if I were made of glass and would break, and giving the address to the driver twice, as if I could not possibly be trusted to remember the number of my own home.

Perhaps this was what gave me the idea that came next.

As soon as we had turned a corner and I knew that we were well out of sight of my fiancé, I stopped that taxi, and I gave the driver another address.

CHAPTER XVII

THE QUAIN'T INTERVIEW

"This life is like a curious play;
Each mask doth to the other say
'Let us be open as the day!'
The better to conceal himself."

THE GIRL'S STORY.

THE address I gave was the first one that came into my head.

For you know I was still in an excited, stirred-up, nervy mood; ready either to burst into tears or to go off on an adventure of my own. I chose the tiny adventure. Why not? I felt. Why shouldn't I? Yes! I would! And I did.

I gave the address of that place in the Cromwell Road where they held that dancing class which Dorothy had begged me to join.

I wasn't thinking of joining, of course. That was out of the question. But I did want to see (for once in my life) what kind of thing an up-to-date "practice-dance" might be. I did want to hear the gay, giggling, stuttering, babbling tunes of the moment; not just played by the band of some tea-shop where I'd been taken by David, but being danced to by people of my own age. I did want to see for myself that Jazz-roll that there was all this talk about. I did want a look at evening-frocks of rose, and gold and jade and ivory, fluttering about a room on live, laughing girls, instead of my having to stare at those frocks (stuck on to

waxed-faced mannequins with hard-boiled simpers and bulrush eyelashes !) through a shop window !

Oh, how tired one gets of seeing life from a long way off and from the outside !

Or was that just my discontentedness ?

For most of all I think I wanted to break away from that mood that had fallen upon me of feeling myself "outside" the rest of the world which was a Vitagraph show to me. Suddenly I had found myself wanting to come up close to some of these other young people ; wanting to mix with them, wanting to speak to them, wanting to be "in the picture" even for a few moments. . . . Oh, yes ! How I wanted, too, a talk with another girl. . . . I felt that this would drive away those uncanny day-dreams that had come upon me in the Park and that hung about me even in the taxi. This would be the best and the natural tonic for me. And Dorothy from the office, who went to that dancing class, was the only girl friend I could think of, within reach.

The taxi stopped at that number in Cromwell Road, and I thanked goodness that I had brought some silver with me in that bag, which, of course, I was carrying, also David Lewis's latest present—an umbrella with a tortoiseshell and gold handle (which I'm always terrified of leaving behind.) I paid the driver, forgetting that David had, said in an independent voice, "Don't wait !" and marched up the steps.

In the big vestibule I came upon a woman in an apron and (still feeling ever so independent and excited) I asked her if this was where the dancing-class was held. Of course I imagined she'd just say "yes," and show me upstairs ; (Dorothy had told me that the dancing-room was on the first floor.)

But here I had a disappointment and a shock.

The woman in the apron looked in a tired way from me to a couple of packing-cases tied with rope and standing in a corridor at the back.

"Was here; the class *was* here, Miss," in a gloomy voice. "Didn't they let you know they was moving to-day?"

My heart sank into my shoes. "Moving?"

"Yes, Miss. The people as owned the house has sold it now, and so the class had to clear at a few days' notice. Gave the last lesson this afternoon. Somewhere in Knightsbridge I believe they'll be holding the classes now, but I expect they'll be writing to everybody to let them know, them as doesn't."

Moving . . . had to clear . . . the last lesson. . . . Here was a damping thing! A funny unreasonable sort of feeling took me of this being a much more important disappointment than it really was. I thought "if only I'd come before! If only I'd come when Dorothy asked me!" I stood there disconsolately, holding that bag and that umbrella, and said, "Then I suppose it's no good my asking for Miss Dorothy Rutter; there's nobody here at all, then!"

But the woman in the apron answered, "I don't know anybody of that name; there's so many come! But there is one of the young ladies here to-night." She nodded towards the stairs. "She's waiting; said she'd wait until the man called with the van for the piano; he said he'd come, and she hasn't been here half an hour. If you'd like to pop up and speak to her about your friend, Miss? . . ."

"Thank you; I will." For I felt I just couldn't go straight home again, having done this rather absurd thing all for nothing, having not even seen the room

where all these people danced, or any of the girls who taught them.

The woman said, " You know your way up ? "

" I'll find it," said I, feeling quite adventurous again ; and I ran up wide stairs, past a dark, empty alcove, up another short flight of stairs and to a door, standing ajar.

Rather shyly, in I went. The floor was hard and slippery, to my feet, and at first I could not see how big the place really was because only one of the lights had been turned up. This light gleamed mysteriously in huge mirrors, in their gilded frames, and along walls covered in amber silk. At one end of the room loomed something like a covered haystack. The piano, packed and ready. And on the top of it sat a slim black shape with slender feet dangling, elbows on knees, and hands before its face. . . .

Quite uncanny for a moment, that big, dim-golden room, empty but for the one slight dark figure that was perched there like a lonely black bird mourning for her mate ! . . . I suppose it was her attitude and her hidden face and the dead-black dress that gave me at once the feeling that here was somebody miserably unhappy ?

Or was it just my fancy ?

At the sound of my steps on the polished floor the girl in black started, took her hands from her face, and slipped down from the top of the piano ; all as quickly as a trout, that's been lying still as a stone in a brook-pool, darts away as soon as there's a shadow cast from the bank.

Putting up her head in a very smart little black three-cornered hat she was wearing, she walked quickly across the shiny floor to me.

"I thought you were the people for the piano," she said in a quick careless sort of tone, "I've been waiting for them here, like Patience on a monument, for ages. Did you want to see somebody here; is there anything I can do for you?"

Still rather shy, I told her something about the dancing-class, and Dorothy. That was when we began to talk. It was at eight o'clock, for I heard a clock strike somewhere in the house as I was speaking.

* * * * *

At half-past eight the people for the piano had still not come and we were still talking to each other, this girl in black and I. We were having the quaintest conversation that I could have imagined between two utter strangers. We were talking together as if we were sisters or school friends who had known each other all their lives. We, who didn't even know each other's names!

She, this other girl, was saying to me such things as this:

"But how many engaged people *are* in love, do you suppose? They know there is such a thing. Haven't they heard of it unceasingly from these books and plays and operas and legends? Haven't they been told it's the most perfect happiness in the world? They're young, and they're cocksure that the best of everything is good enough for them. Conceit! All our conceit—their conceit, I mean. Solomon knew that when he said all was vanity. They all imagine that the most wonderful thing in the world is bound to happen to them. But does it? *Does it?*"

"If not," I answered this girl wonderingly, "why

are all 'these couples together? What *has* happened?"

"Why," said the girl in black, "what's happened is this, my dear. For years a girl looks forward to this miracle that must come into her life. A boy, I believe, looks forward just as eagerly under all his pretence; more so, perhaps. Their ears are pricked up secretly for every sound that may mean it's coming. Their eyes watch every shadow cast before. Then, one day, the boy meets some girl who takes some special flattering notice of him. He fancies she must care, and almost at once he's sure he is in love with her. *He can't bear to think that it's not so.* Or, put it that the girl for the first time gets a little extra attention from some young man. She tells herself, 'This must be love!' *because she'd hate to think it wasn't.* And then each of them proceeds to dress the other up in a dazzle-costume made of scraps of all the love-verses that they can remember, and all the day-dreams they've ever dreamt, and all the love-scenes they've ever seen at theatres or in novels, and all the love-tunes they've ever heard played or sung. Strip off that coat of many colours, and how much love is left?"

"Aren't you very cynical? Do you really think that kind of thing is the reason people get engaged?"

The other girl looked at me with her bright black eyes and said, "You told me that you, for instance, were engaged to a man who was kindness itself."

(You see, this part of the talk came somewhere about the middle of our interview. It had started by her noticing my left hand, without a glove on it, resting on the piano near which we stood, and by her saying what very beautiful rubies those were.)

She went on, now, in her quick voice, "To marry somebody because he's 'kind' to you might seem the wrong reason to some people. Romantic people would tell you that you ought only to take the young lover who lit up the whole world for you with a magic pink light. Sensible people would say that pink light didn't last, but that kindly companionship did. Then the romantic ones would declare that you wouldn't be satisfied with the companionship of a man, however kindly, who hadn't been able to turn on even a spark of pink light in your life and that you'd resent it and find yourself bringing it up against him for ever—whereas for the man who'd once flooded the earth with rosy radiance you would always have a kindness, no matter how short a time that light had shone. Then the sensible people would say 'Rubbish!' and would *exennt omnes*, very irritably. Which is their way of ending any argument about passion!" wound up this girl, with a curl of her lips.

I couldn't help thinking how much more instructive it was listening to this strange girl's talk than to anything that my fiancé seemed to have to tell me.

I asked, "But what should *you* say? Don't *you* think there are other ways of getting engaged for people, even nowadays, than what you were talking about just now?"

"Oh, yes," answered the other girl, lightly. "Think how many a woman marries some one just to show some one else that she doesn't really care that she isn't marrying *him*!"

"Pique? But no nice girl marries out of that!"

She looked at me; looked twice, and smiled, touching my sleeve in a friendly way.

" You pretty, blue-eyed, old-fashioned little creature. Where were you brought up? You ought to be wearing a polonaise with cherry-coloured ribbons and a bustle, instead of a tailored suit! You talk like some one out of an old yellow-backed novel. Now don't say you think I'm a ' nice ' girl. At least I can see I am the first woman who's really talked to you, and if we saw anything of each other you would become fearfully fond of me. Yet——"

" Yet what ? "

She tossed off with her careless laugh, " Yet I am one of those girls myself ! "

I looked back at this slim, pearly-pale brunette in the ultra-smart black frock and the little hat with its defiant feather that would have been ridiculous, on me.

She looked wonderful, original—and she was right. I could have become fond of her, if we'd been able to be friends. But in spite of her smartness and laughter and the . . . chic, I suppose it's called, with which she wore those French fashion-paper clothes, in spite of the reckless little theories she had been throwing off at me, I felt that she was *putting on* something over a dark unhappiness of mind.

Or am I no judge of what another girl feels ?

" You don't mean you are one of the girls who has got engaged to show somebody else——"

" I'm not engaged yet. But I shall be to-morrow," said the girl in black as coolly as if she were saying, " To-morrow I shall go and have a shampoo." She smiled at me, holding her head high.

" The . . . other person has asked you to marry him ? "

" Not yet, but he will to-morrow, as I tell you,

my dear. He has all the signs of it. He walked across the Park with me this evening when I was coming here, before he went on to night duty at his railway station; and I thought to myself, 'Ah, yes. You're just working up to a proposal, my good lad. But I shan't let you bring it off to-night; because I don't feel quite up to it myself?' So I headed it off for that time. But to-morrow I'm going off by train with him somewhere, and he will wangle an empty compartment; and shyly (he's still shy) he'll ask me then. And I shall say yes. . . . And then there will be another of those engaged couples——"

"Don't!" I begged her. "Don't talk like that. For I do think you are nice. Too nice to marry anyone who isn't as nice as you are!"

"Oh; but, my dear, he is nice—this young man who is winding himself up to propose to me to-morrow. He's a dear boy; kind, chivalrous, brave as a lion, I know; sweet-natured, straight. Decent-looking, too; and not at all unclever at his job. Knowing nothing of passion, and the coloured undergrowth of Life, of course! Ignorant as a babe about women, but what does that matter? Men who know anything about us know, first of all, how to hurt us. It's part of All That."

As she said the last words her quick, clear voice hardened, and again I sensed that unhappiness was near me, and I felt helplessly sorry for her.

I forgot my own affairs. I actually forgot about being engaged to David Lewis; forgot that I myself was going to get married quite unromantically and without even a glimmer of that "rosy radiance" that she had talked about.

So that was passionate Love and All That? . . . I

was very vague, really, on anything to do with that "coloured undergrowth. . . ." Girls aren't allowed to hear anything clear or helpful on this subject, which at the same time is what is supposed to settle their life's happiness, or the reverse. No wonder girls get muddled about it !

Or is it only I, Julia, who have been brought up in a blindfold, out-of-date, discredited manner ?

Or am I quite wrong, and is All That just an unimportant detail in a woman's life ? Is "the House" and "Kindness" the important. . . . ?

Or is everybody who brings us up, ignoring "All That" and saying, "Hush, dear ; one doesn't *mention* such things"—is everybody like this wrong, and cowardly, and harmful ?

Or is it only my impertinence to suggest this ?

Or don't I know *what* to think ?

But to come back to this quaint interview in this place where I'd never set foot before this evening, where I'd expected to find a crowd of people doing the Jazz-roll, and where I had only found this big, dim, empty room, with a piano done up in sacking and one stranger-girl whom I had never seen in my life before, who had begun talking to me like this !

Awkwardly, hesitatingly, I said, "I wish you were going to be happy to-morrow. I do wish you believed that love can come to everyone !"

"Love——?" Then she stopped, at an interruption.

From close outside the house, in the back street on to which the farther window looked, a piano-organ began to trill out, loudly and mechanically, a tune of which I was rather tired. The stranger-girl seemed even more bored with the tune than I was ; she set

her lips and frowned with impatience, then stepped quickly to the back window and shut it with a jerk.

More faintly through the closed window came the beat and rhythm of the refrain :

• "Give me the Moonlight, give me the Girl!
And leave the rest . . . to . . . me!"

and the girl went on with what she had been going to say.

"Love? Love hurts too much. 'No thorns go as deep as a rose's'; that's perfectly true. Count on love, and it's putting all your eggs into one basket, a basket with a broken handle. Men don't want love; it carries them too far out of their depth: all they want is to amuse themselves surf-bathing. Girls who are out for the best time don't go in for love; the successful woman is as cold and as shallow as a bit of cat's ice! . . . Ah," she broke off at the noise of heavy footsteps on the stairs, "there are the men for the piano at last. . . . Good-night! Thank you for keeping me company and letting me talk nonsense to you. For it was nonsense; I am going to be happy enough with this lad to-morrow. Anyhow, I shall make him happy. He's growing up already under my tender care, believe me. Nothing like a well-managed courtship for bringing them out. And to him I'm the only girl there's ever been; absolutely the First. So it ought to be all right, oughtn't it? Good-bye, my dear—here, don't leave that bag of yours behind you——"

For I was, amongst so many other things, forgetting That Bag.

All the way home to Grannie (who had fondly imagined me all this time under David's wing) I

thought of this oddly intimate talk with this girl whose very name, even yet, I did not know.

She had said herself in the middle of it, "Curious what secrets one will let out to strangers as long as one knows that one is safe never to meet them again! I am letting you see more of the real Me this moment than I should ever show to my own family and the friends who've known me in my pram!—just because I know you've never met, or will meet, one single person I know, and because you've no idea of what I'm supposed to be like in everyday life! Oh, the blessing of unburdening oneself to some one who can never compare notes about me with one's so-called intimates!"

Queer, disillusioned, rather fascinating, smart, puzzling, pathetic girl who was to have got engaged to-day!

My meeting and talk with her seems to have given me more to think about than anything I've ever heard said by Grannie or David.

Or am I undutiful?

But all to-day I've been wondering about that girl in black, and her engagement.

I hope the young man really is nice, but that I shall never know . . . It's like having an interesting book sent back to the library before I've read more than a chapter . . . I shall never see her again; I shall never see him at all.

My best wishes, all the same, for both these strangers!

CHAPTER XVIII

"FIRST, RETURN"

"And when far away from the lips that we love,
We have but to make love to the lips that are near."
—Moore.

THE BOY'S STORY

FUNNY place, a railway carriage, in which to ask a girl to marry you!

For that was where I proposed to Phyllis Carteret, and I dare say it was a bit of a surprise to her. It was a surprise to me; in fact everything had been that for weeks past. . . .

Well, how it happened was that I had to go and see one of our men at a station about an hour's run out of town on the Great Intermediate. The night before, walking with Phyllis through the Park, I'd asked her if she'd care to make the run with me. (You see, I'm able to travel first-class nowadays on my "privilege"; and I could manage another "first, return" for a girl; I was still feeling full of stamps!). As for Phyllis, she'd been looking a little pale lately.

"Been gadding about," I told her. "Enjoying yourself too much."

"Enjoying myself? You think so?" said Phyllis, with a queer little mocking sort of smile she sometimes has. I don't like it. It makes me feel as if she thought I was still about eighteen. . . . If she were engaged to a chap, she couldn't feel like that, could she? She'd have to realise, *then*, that he was a man.

I told her, "A dash into the country will do you

good; blow the cobwebs away. You can go for a walk and get primroses or something while I see this man, and then I'll meet you at the tea-shop and we'll get the fast train back to town. That'll land us home just in time for dinner."

"Listen to the old campaigner! How well you plan things out, Mr. Smith," said Phyllis; getting at me. But I was used to that; she was like it with everybody. She couldn't be like it with a chap she was engaged to. He'd see a different sort of Phyllis, I thought; and I thought how wonderful that would be. Don't they always say how love changes a girl, softening her into a woman, and all that sort of thing? I must see it happen, some day, for myself; I must.

Going down next day, Phyllis was as gay as a lark. Chattering away, humming the latest tunes, munching the chocolates I'd bought, and teaching me that absurd old-fashioned children's game, Road Cribbage. Each of us took one side of the railway and scored points on the different objects the train passed. A black sheep counted ten, a windmill thirty, and so on. Great fun we had over that. . . .

But at the back of my mind, all the time, a resolution seemed to pulse in time to the rhythm of the train. "I must take a chance, I must take a chance," it drummed in my ears. I'd say the most important thing I'd ever had to say in my life, to Phyllis. The thought had stuck, you know, of her getting engaged to some other fellow and of how I'd loathe it, and of what a blank there'd be in my life without a girl. All the time we sped through the country all growing green I was making up my mind. I could but try my luck with her, after all. This idea had been there even last evening when I walked with her through the

Park towards Cromwell Road, where she was to wait for that man to fetch away the piano. Yes; I might have said something then. But I couldn't see how the land lay, one atom. . . .

How does a fellow tell, as a rule? Am I a freak not to know more about it?

Even going down, I couldn't. Phyllis was at her liveliest. She reminded me more than ever of a dancing reflection of light that skips all over the place and is never for an instant quiet. You can't say . . . those things to a girl when she's like that.

Then, coming home, she was different. I noticed that the moment we got into the London train. I had wangled a carriage to ourselves (which I couldn't manage, coming down from town), Phyllis, settling herself into her corner seat and tucking her bunch of primroses into her coat-belt, was actually quiet. The little mocking sparkles had died out of her eyes; and her mouth (her mouth that was always laughing and making fun) had a sort of droop that I'd never seen there before.

I was immensely glad to see it; glad she was quiet and "not doing her rev'vs," as we'd say in the Squadron, or bothering to be amusing. Didn't that show I must be more to her than most of these fellows who came to the house and took her about? She was always laughing with them, but here she was letting me see her in another light. This was not everybody's Phyllis. Saying nothing; gentle, I did like that. I was fond of her. I believe I'd never known how fond I was of her until that minute. No; I couldn't let her go getting engaged to other people. Not without a shot at it myself. I'd try . . . And then, a new mood settled upon me. Idiotically nervous I felt;

wished the fast train were faster and both of us in our own places and nothing said!

Just as I was thinking this, she smiled across at me. Not her usual gay, mischievous smile, but a small, rather weary but contented sort of affair that seemed to own up that she knew she was with somebody who wouldn't worry her to talk or anything, if she didn't want to.

Funny how that seemed to make me glad to be with her again, at once!

I leant forward. I said, "Tired?"

"I am, a little."

She put up her hands to that lop-sided little hat arrangement that she wears, with the feather. She took out the pearl-headed pins and stuck them into the dark, blue upholstery stuff of the carriage-back; then she lifted off her hat and put it on her lap, and leant her head back against the window, shutting her eyes.

It was the first time I'd seen her with her eyes shut and her dark lashes down against her cheeks. Funny how much younger it made her look—and nicer-looking and—something I'd never imagined that Phyllis Carteret could ever look. Helpless!

She made me feel I'd do anything on earth to help her; not that I imagined she wanted helping, really, a bit. Except that every girl in the world wants looking after; and doesn't every man want a girl to look after? It's what he's there for. And, until he's got her, he's only half-living, doing half his job, knowing half-enjoyments. I'd been doing that up to now and I was fed up with it. I must have this other. I couldn't live without it any more. I must be everything to a woman, and do everything for her.

However, the only thing I could do for Phyllis at that moment was to take the hat from her lap and shove it up on to the rack for her.

"Thank you, Jack," she said, without opening her eyes.

Suddenly I came across to sit by her. For I thought, "*Now I've got her to myself. Half an hour until the next stop. I'll have my shot.*" And I pushed up the arm of the seat next to her so that I could sit nearer.

"I'm so sorry you're tired," I said, feeling my way; feeling a fool, too. "Poor little girl!"

This was absolutely the first time I'd said that to her. It made me feel a worse fool. An awful thing happened to me. *Cold feet!*

I wondered how many fellows with the proposal practically on their lips get cold feet like an iron hand (that's a bit mixed, but it expresses what I felt), an iron hand that holds them back from what they want to do. I did want to. I wished to Heaven I could shake this nervousness that was taking this rotten form of hinting, deep down in my mind, "*You don't want to do this thing. Stop. This is not for you. You are not keen enough.*" Which was absurd, when I'd arranged the trip on purpose!

I said to myself, "Ass!" I thought how different old Slim would have been. Not with Phyllis in those circumstances (she being dead off him, of course), but with any girl he liked. I thought, "What the something *do* fellows say next?" Nothing came. Words dried up in my mouth.

Phyllis spoke next.

"Oh, I'm not as tired as all that. It was only the fresh air made me drowsy when I was picking primroses. It's nice being with you."

This bucked me up again, especially when she wound up in the prettiest way she's ever spoken to me: "You are a nice kind thing, aren't you?"

"Am I?" I pulled myself together to get hold of her hand. That was the thing to do. I did know that. I held on to it, feeling ever so much more encouraged. I gave a sort of mental "*shut up!*" to that voice from nowhere that was muttering to me, "*Stop. This is not right for you. This is 'off.' This is not what you are looking for. Let go that hand in yours!*"

I held it. "Pretty hands you've got," I said looking at them. (She wore soft grey gloves a bit big for her, with three broad white lines down the back.) Desperately I began wondering again how all the fellows I knew, for instance, started in to fix up their engagements. . . . If I could only get the start before I got cold feet again! Hardly knowing what I was doing, I began smoothing out those white stripes on the glove with my thumb as I held the girl's hand. . . .

In a second something queer happened.

Phyllis snatched her hand from me and sat up straight with such a look in her eyes, as if she were—yes, as if she were remembering something that hurt her.

"Don't!" she rapped out. "Why must you think of doing that? It was—— What made you do *that*, just then?"

"What?" I asked, staring. "What's the matter? What have I done?"

"Nothing."

Then she sat back. Then she said again, "Nothing. Only it gets on my nerves to have my gloves touched like that."

"Sorry," I said stiffly.

For who is to understand a woman? I'd just been getting on A 1 with that rather cranky man I had to interview at the station; I know I'm no fool, really. But dashed if I understood what made this girl fly up off the handle-bar and get that look in her eyes in a flash, just because I'd touched her glove like that. What was it?

She pulled off both gloves; stuffed 'em into her bag. Nobody said another word as the train rushed through a tunnel and out again. I sat wishing we'd never met. If you're born to put your foot into it with women, better live and die a celibate, as Slim once said.

But my next glance at Phyllis showed me that the droop had caught down her mouth again and that there was a wet gleam through her eyelashes. My heart gave a jump, and I stopped having cold feet from that moment. I thought I'd never seen anything so pathetic and sweet. *This* was the different Phyllis, at last. . . .

"Look here," I blurted out. "I am sorry!"

Phyllis opened her eyes wide and laughed; but it was too late. I'd seen the other look before. She tried to carry it off by saying lightly, "Sorry? What on earth for? You haven't done anything, Jack."

"Yes, I got on your nerves. Then I snapped at you. When you were tired! I am a beast!"

"Oh, what are you talking about?" said Phyllis, smiling at me. Then I took both her ungloved hands into mine, and she let me hold them. I took them both up against my face. She let me. Cool, long, soft, slender fingers she has got. I found myself kissing them; and she let me.

"Dear!" I said, thankful to say it.

For didn't it mean that the best of life was near me at last? She said nothing. I would have cut off my right hand for her then. . . . I made her lean her black little head against my shoulder, and she did not seem to mind a bit. To think that at last, after all my loneliness and empty dreams, a girl's head rested there at last! It was too wonderful; it was more wonderful than I could even feel at the time—from reaction, I supposed. A sweetheart at last! I was only Jack Smith the young railway official, a chap like thousands of others, but the most wonderful thing in the world was coming to me as surely as it came to Romeo and those lovers whose story lasts for ever. A sweetheart! I should realise it presently; my chance, my luck. For she must be a darling to let her head rest there. . . .

"You are a darling," I said, my heart thumping, and myself feeling sort of miserable all over—because I was so overjoyed, I expect. "You know I wouldn't ever hurt you for the world, Phyllis, don't you?"

"I do know. I'm sure of it" (softly). "You wouldn't hurt a soul or make them ever sorry or sore. You are the sweetest boy."

"Do you really think that of me? You wouldn't tell me once. You know I'd never mean to get on your nerves or anything. And you do like to be with me?"

"I do. I do. You—oh, you're a comfort to be with."

Funny way of putting it! But at least I was sure of her now. Clearing my throat I said, "Stay with me for keeps, Phyllis?"

There, it was out now. That rotten nervous mood

threatened me for a moment, muttering, "*A mistake, a mistake. This isn't what you want.*" I shoved the mood away, watching Phyllis's silent face, reflected in the glass of the carriage window. We passed a field with elms; three birds flew out.

"Look. Three magpies. How does that count in road-cribbage? Don't three magpies mean a wedding? Let it be ours, Phyllis!"

She smiled. I held her hands tighter and went on telling her I knew it was neck, my asking her at all, even now I'd got my promotion; but that if she'd be engaged to me I'd work like ten million niggers to make good and get on. I went on about how I knew that no end of chaps a lot more brilliant than I was would tell her the same thing, but that none of them would try harder to make her happy or look after her in every possible way. There was nothing I wouldn't do, and she could bank on me. (She knew that.)

I talked an awful lot before I could get her to promise anything definite, and I began to feel very anxious. We were getting towards town, and I felt I mustn't let her step out of that train without fixing it up. She might go off and meet some of those other men at home, and forget all this softened mood of thinking I was "the sweetest boy." I couldn't let her. What would be left for me? That life without a sweetheart, with nothing to look forward to. That beastly blank loveliness of London before——

"Phyllis, Phyllis!" I heard myself beg, and I clutched her hands. "Please. You must be kind to me. I—I can't stand it, I say, if you turn me down. You won't, will you? You'll have me?"

Suddenly she turned. Her eyes were big; her whole face upset.

"Oh, Jack dear! D'you think I ought to?" she cried. "You're such a dear. Is it playing the game? I'd feel safe and at home and on a rock of affection with you, I know! But—— And if I don't take you, you'll find some girl who'd suit you so much better——"

"I shouldn't, *ever!*" I told her, with another backward glance at those horrible days. . . . "You're the only one I shall ever see. What d'you mean by 'if you ought'? If you could—oh, Phyllis, I'd be the proudest chap on earth."

"Too good for this!" she muttered as if it broke from her. "Too good for me!"

"Phyllis!" I nearly shouted. How could I allow her to say such things? "Only say you'll have me!"

And I knew I'd got to clinch it now; clinch it. I wasn't going to let her slip away. I just wouldn't walk home with her again through streets and parks crowded with lovers (as they always seem to be now), and I the only man in sight, perhaps, who hadn't got a sweetheart of his own. We were all born to have one, we young chaps of all the countries of the world. We've got to find her. Here was mine; must be. Next time I took her anywhere I must be able to look at all the young men in uniform or civvies with girls beside them, and I must be able to think, "*Not one of 'em has got what I haven't got now. Last night I was outside all that push. To-night I'm one of them. Joined up in the big army of the world's lovers that's mobilising for ever not only in London, but all over Europe, America, wherever there are young men and girls to belong to them. To-night I've got my sweetheart, too. No more loneliness, but a happy engagement and a little mate and home ahead. I'm for it too. This is it. It must be.*"

London rushed towards us on each side of the train as I said to Phyllis, "I won't take No. And you can't back out after this!" and I dropped one of her hands and lifted her chin and kissed her full on the face—the first time I'd ever kissed a girl in my life.

It should have been the most wonderful moment I'd ever known. Wasn't it what I had been aching for ever since I had been grown-up? Wasn't this thing the reason, when men rush off whistling to catch trains, and girls fly to meet them at the other end, eyes all lighted up? Wasn't it the song behind every tune that sends thrills down your back? The story beyond that line of stars on the most interesting page of any novel?

Yes. Then—funny thing how differently it took me! Why, in the name of all bad luck, didn't it seem to mean those things to me? Why did I feel clumsy, awkward, with the girl? And why must that infernal inner nervousness whisper to me just at that exact moment, "*There is nothing in this! You will get nothing out of this! It is a washout!*" . . .

That was rot. I drove out of the terminus between the crowds with Phyllis, my arm about her in the taxi, and it *was* a wonderful moment.

I just made up my mind that it must be. It will be. It shall be!

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT THE FAMILY SAID

"Anyhow, *we* haven't got to marry him. . . ."

—*Any Family, of Any Fiancé.*

THE BOY'S STORY

SEEMS to me that getting engaged is very much like that game "Consequences." What "he" said and what "she" said is bound to be followed by what "the world" said. The world, of course, being the little private world of "their" people and friends.

Take "her" people. Always a most important question to an engaged man (I suppose I shall get accustomed, some day, to calling myself that). All Phyllis's people have been most decent to me—and yet—and yet everyone of them has managed to get me just a bit puzzled. As if they were thinking of something that doesn't come into our engagement; thinking of it all the time. Now what is it? Perhaps only my fancy. . . .

To begin with her mother. Now, Mrs. Carteret is about the sweetest lady I've met. Grey hair fluffing out round a pale pink face like a rose that's been under the rain, and lies down a good deal on the big couch in their drawing-room, because she's not strong. Rather older than her husband, I fancy; and, I consider, streets too good for him. But you can tell from the way she says "Harry" and picks a bit of fluff off his coat that he's the only man on earth to her. I think that's lovely. And I tell you I'm bucked

that she likes me. For she said as soon as I was alone with her, "My dear boy! I do mean it that you are a dear boy. Jack, I am so happy about this. Oh! You don't know! Happier than I thought I was going to be able to be!"

(What did she mean by that?)

She said, "It's such a mercy. I can absolutely trust my poor wayward Baby to you, I know!" You see, Phyllis is the youngest and favourite; she's never shocked or old-fash. about anything Phyllis does, says or wears. Thinks Phyllis can do no wrong because she's like her father.

As for her father, he said, "Glad Phil's had the sense to accept you. I never thought she'd settle things this way——"

(Now, what did he mean?)

"Or see what was good for her," said Mr. Carteret, "a young chap like you; bound to rise, steady as a rock, and not like the rest of—well! you know what I think of your generation, Smith. I don't see that the war's altered that much, except that they fancy themselves more. I can mostly tire 'em out still when it comes to a day's going and a dance after! Gad, they ought to have seen me at twenty-five."

You see, Mr. Carteret is one of these men who can't bear to leave off being twenty-five long after he's five-and-forty, if you'll believe me. Says to girls, "*Remember, I might be your grandfather*" in one breath, and "*Please don't call me mister!*" in the next. As keen on his clothes as he is on his business. The kind of man who "holds up" the bathroom for hours every morning and comes out at last in a Paisley silk dressing-gown, smelling like the whole inside of

Morny's shop. Phyllis told me this. When her best pot of vanishing cream vanishes completely, she's safe to find it on the glass-shelf of "Harry's dressing-room among his rows of bottles of special hair stuff, tooth stuff and skin stuff." Don't see the point of all this myself in a man (though Phyllis said once in her far-fetched way that it all meant the One Thing that really *holds* a woman). But Mr. Carteret's dashed clever, and popular. Well-thought-of, too, by lots of our people on the Great Intermediate. Going to be useful to me there. So I'm lucky in my father-in-law-to-be too.

My future brothers-in-law I've not seen yet. Both away on ships; but they wired best wishes. One put something a bit . . . surprising, perhaps:

"Advise you, as a friend, to tow prize quickly into port."

Why? Still, rather jolly and informal of him. So I'm lucky there too. Awfully important how to get on with your "in-laws," especially the men.

Funny thing, I never knew that My Fiancée (!) had three married sisters. She took me to see two of them the Sunday after we got engaged.

"Ghastly for you, poor old thing, these inspections," laughed Phyllis on our way down. "Still, all engaged people are 'for it' in the same way. Be thankful it's only one strange house to-day. My sister Doris lives with Daphne while their husbands are away in Germany. They're twins. I wonder what they'll think of you; and you of them?"

I thought both Daphne and Doris were pretty, fair-haired, gentle, more like Mrs. Carteret than Phyllis is; and—somehow just the sort of little women that you would expect to find living in one of those jolly

little red-roofed houses all about Wimbledon, with a tennis-lawn, and everybody near quite mad on tennis.

"Do you play tennis?" was the first thing the twin sisters asked me, both speaking together. So they did when they asked "Are you a bridge-player?" They were both very sweet to me at tea; I saw they'd got rather an extra "manny" sort of tea put in the dining-room, instead of the rather ethereal sort of drawing-room, with anchovy paste on home-made scones that they begged me to take "while they were hot." They both called Phyllis "dear," and said how awfully well her bobbed hair suited her. Presently Phyllis went off with Doris to see the baby asleep, and I was left with Daphne.

She said to me in a mildly "ragging" sort of way, "I do think you were brave to come. Isn't it rather dreadful for you, being 'vetted' by a whole family like this?"

"Not if I pass. Not if you think I will do as a brother-in-law?"

"Oh, yes," said Daphne prettily. (I like women who can blush.) "Oh, we're so glad to have you. Really and truly. I am sure Doris is too. We think it's so nice! We never, never thought that Phyllis—"

She stopped, a little oddly.

"Never thought that Phyllis what?"

"Oh, nothing. Only we never thought that Phyllis would be able to like anybody like you!"

"Why not?" I laughed. "Am I as repulsive as all that?"

"Oh, of course not! We—we think you delightful. Only—nobody can ever tell what anybody's ever

going to like, can they? The unexpected always happens, doesn't it? Doris and I do really think it is such a very, very good thing for Phil!"

This again I didn't quite grasp. So far everybody had been so glad but so surprised that it was me, Jack Smith, that Phyllis was marrying. It is surprising luck for me. But there seems a special brand of surprise over some reason I haven't fathomed. . . . However, the twins approved; so I was lucky again in two of my sisters-in-law.

"Quite dears," Phyllis yawned on her way back; "but how they do make me long to smash all the Goss china in the house into their grand piano and dash out screaming. Their house is too like millions of others. Same sloping roof and casement windows. Same pinky-cream drawing-room, with strings of beads dangling from the electric light fittings! Same fern in same pot on same table-centre! Same big white perambulator in the hall, same photographs of school friends in evening dress in same silver frames! Everything exactly the same as everywhere else——"

"I bet the place looks different from every other place to the husbands of those girls. When those two fellows get home from Germany it won't be like anywhere else to them! It's the woman in the home that makes the difference. I——"

I took her ungloved hand as I said to her, still feeling a bit shy of these things, "I'd think any place was the only place, Phyllis, with you in it."

Phyllis smiled brightly at me. "You're a dear, too, then. . . ." She went on quickly. "My eldest sister's quite different from the twins. I'm afraid you won't like her. But I shall have to drag you down there next Sunday. She lives in Surrey, in a fish-pond."

"Where?" I asked, rather blank.

Phyllis chattered away gaily (been in top-hole spirits ever since our engagement). "Oh, it's a house that belonged to the trout-fisheries. Built by lunatics for lunatics, I say. The chimneys are on a level with the high road, to the left of which the house is sliding down-hill into the water. The front door leads into the upstairs bed-room, the drawing-room is led into by hens (who all ceased to lay as one man the moment they caught sight of my sister's children desiring eggs), the front is at the back, the back is on the lawn, and the lawn is in these pools. That's the sort of place, my child."

I was rather keen to see the place, after this. Nervous, though, about that other sister. Phyllis said she was nicknamed The Blurter, because she always would point out, in a clear ringing voice, things everybody else in the family was pretending not to see.

Next Sunday, when we got down to the wet wilds of Surrey (Jove, how it rains in that county!) a funny thing happened. Soon as I caught sight of that queer little bungalow under the woods, with its white balcony and the string of pools beyond it fringed with bamboo and dripping rhododendron-bushes, I'd the feeling one has about some places seen for the first time. "*Hullo! . . . I shall be happy here, somehow, sometime . . .*"

Funny! Then—whisk! the feeling went, and I was introduced to Phyllis's eldest sister.

Nothing frightening about her, I found. Unlike the twins; but gentle, too, in her way. Quieter than Phyllis, taller than Phyllis, and nearly as dark, with no "Vogue"-like dressing about her. She wore an old white felt hat with a shoulder-badge stuck in the band, and a jade-green sports-coat, and she strode

about the damp paths between those trout-ponds in men's breeches and a pair of land-boots. In front of her skipped her two kids; boys, of five and seven, in jerseys and gum-boots and the most disrep. oil-skins I've seen.

These lads seized upon me at once, just because they'd heard I'd been a flying-man and dragged me off with them to the paddock. . . . It wasn't till an hour later that I was allowed to get a word in with my hostess.

Then Phyllis came along and said, "Oh, look here, you've had enough of 'making descents' off a hay-rick with umbrellas for parachutes—go and talk pretty to my sister in the sitting-room!"

Now, I thought that when she had me alone, The Blurter would ask me how soon I'd discovered I was in love with Phyllis, or if I'd been engaged before. Or something "in character" like that.

But not she. She just looked to see if the door was shut. Then the window. Then . . . the first question she asked had nothing to do with my engagement. It was quite unexpected. There was nothing in it. Yet it was . . . odd, somehow.

Phyllis's sister asked, "And how is Mr. Grantham?"

CHAPTER XX

QUESTION-TIME

"Anything to declare, Sir?"

—*Customs Officers.*

THE BOY'S STORY.

RATHER surprised me, hearing that familiar name, from some one who was so new to me.

I repeated, rather stupidly, "Grantham?"

"Yes, Mr. Grantham," said Phyllis's sister, sitting there in the sofa-corner looking at me. "I heard that it was through him you met Phil. He's on the Great Intermediate with you, isn't he? How is he?"

"Oh! He's all right," I told her. "I had a little note from him the other day, to congratulate me."

"A note? He's not at the office, then?"

"Not just now. He's got his fortnight's leave, and he's taking it up in Scotland!"

"Oh! You haven't seen him, then, since you have been engaged?"

"No," I said.

Phyllis's sister said nothing more for a moment. Then we heard a splash from the pool outside the drawing-room. For a second I thought one of those kids of hers (who had got into the little cockle-shell of a dinghy with Phyllis) had fallen in. But it was only one of the big trout leaping. We looked out of the French window at the circles spreading over the water to the rhodos on the bank. My hostess started

asking me if I'd done much fishing, and we talked about that for a minute.

And then, quite suddenly, she came back to the subject before, and asked me, "What do you think of Mr. Grantham?"

I told her that old Slim was a good sort, a topping good sort.

"I always wonder what men mean when they say that about other men. I believe it means that they're too lazy to think," said The Blurter, in her clear but quite gentle voice. "Or else that they don't want to discuss them. Or else that the other men are deadily unattractive, and that they like them out of gratitude because they make such good foils."

I laughed a bit at this. "Slim Grantham, unattractive!" I said. "You haven't met him, then. You'd like him, of course."

"Should I? Why 'of course'?"

"Women always like Slim," I explained. "He always knows what to say to them, and how to get on. He's lively. He's got the looks—he's—oh, you'd like him."

"Oh, yes? Young men always seem to have one person they quote and admire; 'my Pal'! Is he your great friend?"

I told her no; as a matter of fact my great pal had been killed.

"Ah," she looked very gently at me. Then said, "But this Mr. Grantham is a friend?"

"Rather. Been jolly decent to me."

"And you will be seeing him after you are married and all that?"

"I shall until he goes back to Canada, I expect. You know he's only on the Great Intermediate *pro tem.*; got some good billet to come into at home later.

Why shouldn't I be pally with him after I'm married ? ”

The Blurter said nothing for a second. Then she laughed, quite in Phyllis's light-hearted, far-fetched way. “ Perhaps because of the great gulf that some of you will fix between the Bridegroom and the Bachelor ! . . . Do look ! ” she broke off, going to the window again ; “ there's my youngest born trying to row both oars with his stumpy arms——”

We stood up by the window and watched the party in the swaying dinghy under the rain on that pool. It was all white circles of rain-drops and scarlet-and-yellow-and-black reflections from the boat. The smaller kid plied his oars like a Trojan, though making no way at all. As I laughed, that same funny feeling came back to me for an instant. *“ I'm going to have a good time here, some day ; one of the red-letter days.”*

But I hardly noticed it. What I was still wondering was—why all this talk about Slim Grantham ?

Another very rum thing was, what Phyllis's sister said to me just before I went out to take a turn in the boat. Putting her head up in that battered felt thing in rather the way Phyllis does in her Vogue-ish hats, the Blurter looked straight at me and said :

“ Look here, I like you. Generally I can't like men much ; though——” she waved a long arm towards her two ~~lads~~—“ I can love them sometimes. But I like you. Will you come here again ? ”

“ Oh ! I hope so,” said I, a bit taken aback. “ I hope I shall be allowed to see a lot of you all, when we're married. I hope Phyllis will bring me again quite soon.”

“ Yes. But supposing you don't come with Phil ? ”

I stared a bit. She wound up in that odd underlined way, "Even supposing Phil doesn't bring you, come again."

So I suppose I'd "passed" with my third sister-in-law-to-be as well as with the others. But of all the things that had been said by "the world," her last words puzzled me most.

What did she mean?

* * * *

That's enough for what the family said.

Then of course I'd congratulations from outside people; Slim's note and "best wishes" and all that from chaps in the office. Letters, too, from one or two fellows in my Squadron who'd known Tim Harrison and me; I'd written to tell them the news.

There was one other person to whom I thought I'd like to write and say I was engaged to be married. I knew he'd be glad; even though I'd only met him once in my life.

This was that Doctor Weatherby; man who'd picked me up and carried me off in his car to have a talk at his place, one evening. It was when I was at such a desperate loose end that I can hardly believe it was myself, now. I hadn't seen him since, but I'd never forgotten him . . . or things he'd said to me then.

I was no end bucked to get, as answer to my news, a note from him asking me to go round to Wimpole Street, and smoke a pipe with him the next evening or the one after that.

Round I went, and jolly glad I was to see him again, and to plank myself down into that big arm-chair in his smoking-room; Lord, what centuries

it seemed since I had sat there before, the loneliest beggar in London, not a girl-friend to his name; ready to "pick up" a stranger out of the street. Now here I was an engaged man. It did come home to me then how dashed lucky I was. I fancy I realised it at that moment more than I had since I'd been engaged.

The Doctor was jolly sympathetic; he didn't cross-examine me a bit, and yet I found myself answering on my own, questions that he might have put. About where I'd first met Phyllis. What her people were. How soon I thought we might be married.

"A year's time, we thought." And I told him of my rise. He lifted his shaggy eyebrows and nodded over his pipe. Thought it good, I know. I told him I was saving each week as much as I could. Of course going about was a bit expensive, and one was bound to go about when one was engaged; take the girl to shows and things.

"Girl very keen on 'Shows and things?'" asked the Doctor.

I laughed. "Aren't all girls?"

He said, "H'm; but I hope she isn't one of these new young women whose pleasure is all from without inwards? Girls who don't bloom unless it's under the restaurant-lights, and whose pulses don't quicken except to an orchestra? I see them about. . . I suppose they are the partners that my fellow would have had now if his dancing-days hadn't been cut off short in 'sixteen. . . . A far cry from their mothers, 'sitting-out' in conservatories. These girls don't want to sit anything out, with any young man. Nor to have those silly, shy little flirtations that meant so much to the Victorians (bless 'em). Their

mothers whispered over a stolen kiss; these girls discuss menus, and whether the young man 'did them well' and if he can jazz or not. Affairs of the heart? These Nineteen-Nineteen girls haven't got hearts; they've only got feet."

"Oh, I say, sir."

The Doctor smiled. "Perhaps that's just old fogeyishness. Glad your girl isn't like that, that's all. Got a photograph to show me, Jack?"

I took out of my jacket-pocket the soft leather case Phyllis had given me, with a strip of celluloid glazing her new portrait; one in her black evening-frock.

The Doctor gave it a very straight look.

Then "Good. A live wire all right, if I may say so." Then bluntly, "How old is she? Twenty-five?"

"No! Only twenty-one; just a fortnight younger than I am."

"Really? Young people vary so from eighteen to twenty-eight. . . . I was going by the expression. A clever girl, I take it?"

"Rather," I said, and I went on to tell him yards about Phyllis's cleverness and her playing and her French and the way she could copy the swishiest frocks and hats for herself, so that you'd think they came from the most pricey shops; and how everybody said she could easily have been a success on the stage, and how amusing she was, and what topping company, and how one could never be dull with her, and all that.

The Doctor nodded; gave me back the photograph without speaking; and then, sudden as a bullet, "Well, my boy, and so you're very happy?"

I suppose it was because it was so abrupt that I paused for one moment before I said anything. Only

a moment. I don't suppose the heavy old smoking-room clock had given two ticks before I spoke. Deuced bad luck that just in that time something inside me seemed to pop up its head and say, "*Well, are you? Are you after all? Are you so thundering happy?*" I pulled myself together and reassured him.

"Happy? Rather! Of course I'm tremendously happy, sir."

Ever since then I've had that queer, sneaking feeling that the Doctor wasn't listening to what I said then; what he'd listened to was that pause before I spoke.

Very kindly he looked at me through the smoke, and then he said, "You *ought* to be 'tremendously happy,' young Jack. If you've found your mate in a bonnie stimulating girl, physically fit and mentally healthy, well—what congratulations are enough? The torch is in your hands."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed with it to the framed photograph standing by the clock, of a boy, on a horse. He said just two things, very quietly, "That was my fellow. I shall have no grandson."

One hadn't any answer to that, of course.

He went on as if he hadn't said it.

"Do you vamp?"

"Vamp? . . . Play the piano, sir? Just a bit by ear."

"Ah, yes. Well, you'll understand. All his living and enjoying, until he meets the right woman, means that a young man is practising the bass part of a duet The solo. Deep chords, without much meaning in his own ears, so far. The girl has been practising life alone, too; tinkling notes, perhaps, without strength

or depth. They meet. Bass and treble, together, make music. That is, if she's the woman for him; her melody fitted to his bass. If not—if she is tuned to another nature, not his—well, don't you think those wrong notes would be fairly hideous?"

"Oh, awful," I laughed. For Phyllis, after all, cared. She said I was the dearest boy to her. Her comfort. You couldn't get a girl saying much more than that.

The Doctor said, when I was getting up to go, "An engagement, one has to remember, is the time given to make as sure as one can that there isn't any mistake. It's question-time, Jack; when one asks oneself every-day if it's certain that one is the man for her; if she is the woman. You don't mind my rushing in like this, I hope."

"Rushing in, sir? How d'you mean? I think it's most awfully good of you to take such an interest and to be glad I'm happy and all that! I knew you would be, when I wrote."

For he is topping; he made me promise to look him up again.

Funny thing, though, his saying that about "Question-time." An engagement! I should have thought that was the time after all questions had been answered? Anyhow, after your mind is made up (hers too) what is the good of questions?

I don't want to ask any.

Why should I? Why?

CHAPTER XXI

THE DIFFICULT DAY.

"What shall be said for the wedding-ring?

(One with another.)

A weary thought for a weary thing.

(Mother, my mother)."

—*Swainburne.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

I KNOW what it is that has started my feeling absolutely desperate, as I've done lately.

It's all that talk with that tall dark girl in the dancing-room that evening, when I slipped away "on my own" to get a little glimpse of the outside world.

"Little glimpses" are such a fearful mistake! They make one either wild to go on seeing everything that there is, or else wish that one had never seen anything at all. Nothing's the same afterwards.

That particular glimpse made me keep on comparing my sort of life with that of the strange girl who told me so much of herself just because I was a perfect stranger and would never again meet her or see anybody belonging to her. She was far from happy, herself. She, poor dear, cared for someone, and was going to get engaged to someone else.

But even if she were engaged to the wrong man, at least there was something right about him.

He was the right age for her.

Now David Lewis is not the right age for me. He isn't. No use pretending any more that it's his own sensible and nice to marry a man who was alone, seven when one was born.

Is it right that a girl of eighteen should be going to marry a man who says, "Tut, tut!" to his grey hairs in the glass, and who has to make little jokes about his rheumatism and about how he couldn't walk over the mountains now as he did when he was a lad?

Of course it's nice of him to laugh instead of grumbling about elderliness and that. But ought he to have to do either, a man who's going to marry a quite young girl?

I'm beginning to be quite, quite sure that the most important thing in a fiancé is that he should be the right age. . . .

Now how old *is* that, roughly?

It was just when I was wondering this, that I heard Grannie say something that settled it for me.

She was reminding David Lewis of my christening.

"Do you remember," reminisced Grannie, "how you brought your dear mother, poor Nesta, to old Llandedwydd Church, before it was restored or anything; and how she was to stand godmother; and how she suddenly turned nervous when she had to stand holding the baby for the dear old Rector! Always very shy before people, your mother! And then, David, how she turned to you and whispered all fluttery, '*Oh, I can't hold her, I can't do it!*' and you said, '*Give her to me, Mam. I'll hold her?*' A young man like you. We all thought it wonderful of you. There you stood by the font, holding our little girl here in your arms. . . ."

"Dear me, so I did," said David Lewis, smiling across the tea-table at me. "Think of that, Julia!"

Just in time I choked back the words that rose to my lips: "How awful!"

And I realised that this was a very reasonable sort of

age-limit to set—namely, that *no girl should be expected to marry a man who either had, or could have held her at the font when she was a baby being christened.* Some people think that seven years older than his wife is the perfect age for a husband ; some think ten. That fits in with my theory. No mother would really like to trust a long-clothes baby to the arms of a boy of seven, or of ten. Even at twelve the creature might carelessly drop her on the cocoa-matting.

A lad of fifteen, now, could be trusted to hold the white woolly bundle. . . . which cuts him out from marrying it, twenty years later. I've come to the conclusion that there ought not to be any quite young girls engaged to fiancés of thirty-five, even. . . .

I don't know why I've never seen all this before ?

Or have I seen it ?

Have I been shutting my eyes to it from the start ; and then have things piled themselves up one upon another until at last I've felt I must throw down the burden, and that I can't possibly go on being so unhappy any more ?

It all came in a minute ; the minute that I first heard David Lewis telling Grannie that so far as he could see there was nothing to stop the little girl and himself from getting married in June.

In June !

In a few weeks. . . . !

It was my heart that seemed to stop. I heard Grannie and my fiancé going on chatting pleasantly about "arrangements." The office was now closed down and there was no reason why David Lewis should not be able to retire to the dear little old Bank House in our village, where certain alterations had already been put in hand. David meant to go down to Wales

for a fortnight or so, shortly. On his return, said David, we could get married in London, quite quietly. There was a friend of his, a South Wales man, who was curate at one of these dear, old-fashioned city churches like something out of Dickens. David thought a wedding there, in the circumstances, would be so very nice. Then the honeymoon. Partly at Brighton, he thought, for the little girl to see a bit of gaiety; partly at Llandrindod Wells (a place that had always done his poor mother and himself such a world of good.) As for this house (Grannie's London one) there would be absolutely no difficulty, at the present time, of letting it unfurnished and at quite a handsome figure. Which would leave Grannie free to come down to our house (David's and mine) as soon as we were settled down at home.

These last four words, do you know, sounded to me the most horrible that I had ever heard in my life.

I could hardly wait for Grannie to go out of the room and leave us for what she always calls "the young people's *tête-à-tête*." I knew I'd got to say then, at once, what I meant to say.

Otherwise I should shirk it. There's nothing in the world so horribly difficult, I think, as breaking off an engagement, particularly to a person who has always been kindness itself, and who has simply sprayed one with presents like that pendant and that bag. Oh! How glad I was that I hadn't had time to think it all well over! (All the thinking must have been done at the bottom of my heart without my realising it, as lots of thinking is.) What a mercy that I hadn't already wondered how David would take it, or pictured to myself what a cruel blow it would be to him when "his little sweetheart" rounded upon him without

warning and told him that everything was at an end! How providential that I hadn't made up my mind weeks ago, and that I hadn't been arranging and rearranging how I should put it!

For then I think I should have been such a coward that I shouldn't have "put" it at all.

As it was, no sooner had the drawing-room door closed behind Grannie than I just burst wildly into the subject.

"David," I blurted out, all gaspily. "David! About this wedding in June! I must tell you something at once. It can't be. I can't marry you then; just can't!"

David looked very quickly at me with those kindly eyes of his. I found myself opening and shutting the fingers of my very hot hands, and wiggling my toes about inside my shoes where I stood. There was a second's awful pause. Then I think David said, quite easily, "What is all this, my little girl? You don't want to be married just yet, eh? Not in June. Very well, then. Very well. Why June? Take your time, little woman."

But I somehow knew that it would be just fatal to put anything off. This must be definite.

I shook my head violently, and said, putting meaning into each syllable. "I don't want time, David, please. I am so sorry. But I want this settled now. This minute. It is hateful of me. But I don't want to marry you. Not in June, not *ever*, David! Never, I can't do it. Can't, can't. . . ." Here I felt the idiotic tears welling up; partly misery at the idea of what it would be like, married to him, partly sorrow because I had to hurt him so awfully, partly fright, over the battle that I felt sure I should have to wage before I could get free.

I gulped, took out my handkerchief and set my teeth and pulled myself together to give my explanation as coherently as I could.

"David, I feel I should be too frightfully miserable with you!"

"Miserable?" said David in such a blank voice.

Oh, I'm sorry for any girl who has to hear that tone from any man! I don't wonder lots of them marry *anybody* rather than face breaking off! But I couldn't face marriage. . . .

I gasped, "It's not your fault. It's the font. I mean it's your having held me in my christening robe. It sounds mad. I can't help it. I'm a little beast not to have thought of it before," I scurried on, not daring to look at his face. "I ought never to have got engaged to you. Now you'll never forgive me. You'll hate me, but——"

"Hate you, dear?" interrupted David. To my astonishment his voice sounded now quite normal, and as if I had not just been blurting out irrevocable things. "Hate you? Why? Because you don't feel yourself this afternoon?"

"Oh! You aren't understanding," I nearly wept. "Don't you see, David dear, I do so awfully not want to marry you!"

"Little woman, you aren't feeling well," he told me, soothingly.

And we had a few ghastly moments of argument; I, repeating things about fonts and ages, and he saying I should take my own time about it all, and that I didn't know what I meant myself, and that we'd talk about something else.

I thought. "It's hopeless! I shall never get away from him. . . . I can't make him under-

stand. . . ." And I blew my nose. A sob burst out of me by mistake. I choked down the next.

Then came a long pause; and then David's voice somehow changed. "Well, then. . . if you really don't care for this idea of marrying me——"

"Oh, I don't! Oh, *dearest* David, if you knew how I didn't!"

David actually gave a little laugh. Then went on rather slowly, but in the kindest way, to talk about how it couldn't be helped, then. If I thought he couldn't make me happy, well! he was glad I had found out my mistake in time. He was the very last person in this world to try and force me into anything against my will. . . .

Great lumps of distress rolled off my chest as he told me so.

"You'll let us be disengaged?" I cried; hardly believing his good news. Presently I took off my ring ("Poor Nesta's rubies") and gave it back to him. I did feel such a brute because he was nice about that. And he asked me "as a favour" not to try to give back any of the little presents; he would not think of taking back that bag.

Everything he said was in the very kindest way. I could feel that he considered me an unreasonable child, but that he didn't mean to scold me or even let me be scolded for "not knowing my own mind." . . . I think he thought that was the matter with me.

Then he asked me to allow him something else, which was that *he* might himself tell Grannie about "these altered plans of ours."

This I was only too thankful to let him do. Already the thought had begun to loom like a thunder-cloud. . . . Grannie! She hates all alterations of plans,

she hates all changes that have come about in the world at all, since she herself was quite young, and just married. She would think a broken engagement somehow *wicked*. She would rather everything stayed just as it was; by not thinking it could be changed, people could get accustomed to anything, pleased with it. This, I felt sure, was Grannie's point of view. Uneasily I felt Grannie to be—not just one dear old lady with neat grey hair and a passion for Victorian furniture—but a kind of emblematical figure—the Goddess of Better - Leave - It - Alone. A force! “Grannie,” that which is in the way of reforms for the better. So sweet and lovable, in its own traditions, that people are held back by it, as they wouldn't be held back by a stern and ugly law; but still “Grannie,” still a clog to progress that might bring things that might be sweeter, might be more lovable still!

Or am I a little revolutionary? Anyhow I was thankful, in rather a cowardly way, to hand over to my *ex-fiancé* the work of telling Grannie. . .

Alone in my room I wondered. *Had* he taken my breaking-off as quite final? Or did he think that if he “humoured” me for the present, if he were very sweet about it, I should “come round” later on? (Never, never.) Was he going to explain that to Grannie—

Or were these unfounded suspicions? Grannie when I next saw her, to me as much more of a matter-of-course than I had dared to hope. She was quite gentle in what she did say, though thank goodness she said very little. I could not possibly have told Grannie about my being so unhappy all these weeks just because I was engaged to a man of the wrong age. I couldn't have argued with her that

everything would have been all right perhaps, if I'd been a young girl instead of a cocoon in a cambric robe when he was a young man.

I felt sure Grannie would have barred entirely the whole subject of young men !

Which shows what extraordinary surprises one gets in this world, even from grannies.

Who would have expected that, a fortnight from that difficult day, my Grannie would have been encouraging to come to this house a young man of whom none of us had ever heard ?

CHAPTER XXII

THE PERFECT STRANGER

"As a twig trembles that a bird
Lights on to sing, then leaves unbent,
So is my memory thrilled and stirred !
I only know he came and went."

—*Song.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

YES. Imagine Grannie, of all people, suddenly blossoming out into an adventure.

It happened about a week after that fearful afternoon when I told David Lewis that I couldn't possibly marry him ever. Part of his niceness—or was it part of his "giving me time" to come to "a more reasonable frame of mind?"

No! Let me believe that it was only his niceness that made him arrange to go down to Wales the very next day, so that there should be no awkwardness about whether he should or should not call at this house as he did before our disengagement. He went right away from London, and I'd never liked him so much for anything—not one of that avalanche of presents had made me feel so full of thank-you's to him.

Grannie, however, went about heaving pensive little sighs which I think were reproaches to a silly, unbalanced child (me) and which meant also "Dear me! How one does miss dear David coming in of an evening!"

But she only said it once, in so many words.

Perhaps she thought it was missing David which gave me that frightful headache on the afternoon when

she'd settled to shop fresh muslin curtains for the bedroom windows. For she gave quite an "understanding" little nod when she made me lie down with the blinds drawn, and said, "Don't fret, dearie. Everything is going to 'come right' for you, very soon, too, try and get a little sleep before I come back, now."

I didn't want her to go shopping without me, in broiling Oxford Street; black with people, bristling with parasols, joggling with parcels.

"That won't keep me from getting new curtains," declared Grannie, stoutly. "All these are a disgrace and I can't bear them another minute. Now you lie quiet. I shall be back at five."

She was back before five. I heard a taxi drive up and stop in front of our door, and for a moment I thought it might be David Lewis, come back already to see if I hadn't changed my mind. Dismayed, I took a peep down out of my bedroom window. A man got out of the taxi. I could only see his head and shoulders, foreshortened. But it wasn't David.

It was a quite young man, with very quick movements, and tall. He helped Grannie out, ran up the steps, rang the bell for her, and presently got back into the cab without my having seen his face.

Grannie's face, when she came into my room again, was enough of a surprise!

She was pale from the heat of that blazing afternoon; and her mauve and black toque was crooked, and there was a wisp of her usually neat grey hair straggling beneath her hair-net across one ear. But her eyes shone. And all over her there was something. . . . a something as rosy and irradiating and indescribable as the after-glow of sunset over Snowdon

on a December afternoon. It was—it quite obviously was the look of a woman who has been thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Well, dearie," she said, sitting down on my bed, "did you see me drive up in state just now? And the gentleman who brought me home?"

"I did indeed, Grannie. Where did you—I mean, who was he?"

"A pity he couldn't come in and have a cup of tea with us." This from Grannie! "But he said he had to dash on. Very kind he was to me, really. They keep on writing to the Sunday papers about the horrible manners of the young people of to-day, and I suppose most of them do seem very casual and boisterous."

I feared she was thinking of poor Mabel and her brothers!

"But this young man," went on Grannie, "was certainly an exception. Most beautiful manners he had, I must say. If I had been the Queen herself, he could not have taken better care of me! Indeed, he made me feel as if I were a Duchess at least."

"But Grannie, dear, do tell me; who was he?"

Grannie's bright eyes were looking right beyond me. "It may have been a little unconventional," she said, dreamily. "But when one is my age. . . . Besides, one saw at once that he was a gentleman. And how I should have got home without him I do not know!"

And by slow degrees it came out, how the baking pavements and the crowds of Oxford Street in May had been really too much for Grannie, and how the poor old darling had suddenly begun to feel quite faint! She had struggled to get into the bus to come home; impossible, of course—you know what it's

like just now! Then she had hailed the nearest taxi—not seeing that there was some one in it. (That is one of Grannie's little ways; she's so short-sighted that she is always hailing either a magnificent private car or else a taxi that's cram full of people already). The person in this taxi stopped the driver at once and ordered him to "stop and pick that lady up" (Grannie) and then he (the gentleman in the taxi) had got out and taken off his hat and said ("in the most *charming way imaginable, Julia, my love!*"), "Oh, may I have the pleasure of giving you a lift, ma'am? Where'll I tell him to drive?"

I interrupted, pretending to be dreadfully shocked. "Grannie! A perfect stranger! You let him drive you, alone, from Oxford Street here?"

Up went Grannie's dear little old head in the crooked toque. "It would have been hardly a thing you could have accepted, Julia. I am aware of that. Girls cannot do these things. They lack the worldly wisdom and the experience of men that would enable them to judge which young men are which. I"—with a queenly gesture of her little black gloved hand—"should not make a mistake. Exceedingly nice, the way in which that gentleman allowed me to pay him the exact sum which I owed for my share of the drive. His whole appearance, too! Short-sighted I may be, but——"

"Oh, Grannie darling, I was only teasing you! Of course I know you could never have made a mistake. What a mercy you did hail that taxi! I am sure he was a delightful young man."

Grannie's stateliness softened at once. "Yes, my dear, he was. I hope you will like him."

I looked up at her surprised, over the tea that

had just been brought in. "Like him? I? But Grannie, when shall I ever see him?"

"Next Sunday, at four o'clock," said Grannie, with quite a defiant little smile. "I asked him—Yes! It was the least I could do—if he could not come another day and take tea with me and allow me to thank him at leisure for his great courtesy. He said he would be charmed, and I told him our name, and he gave me his card."

"And he's coming here. . . . Shall I go out and leave you two to talk, dear?" At this Grannie positively dimpled and blushed, as if it were a girl of my own age that I had been teasing.

"Julia, you ridiculous child, I wish you to help me to entertain him, of course, and I should like to have your own impression of him, afterwards. To me——" she hesitated for a second, "to me, of course, he is so extraordinarily like . . . Some one."

I looked at Grannie; she wasn't looking at me. Her face, which was suddenly all different, somehow reminded me of an old photograph of herself, in a pork-pie hat with a feather. She was gazing at that big steel-engraving of "Juliet" on my wall, but perhaps she wasn't seeing that either. She was miles away. . . .

"You say he was like some one you know, Grannie?"

"Some one I met," all absently. "It must have been in '60—well, never mind. It was some one I didn't know at all well. In fact I only saw him once." Then she added this paralysing remark: "He was the only man I ever saw whom I could have cared for like that."

I was much too surprised to say a word, so thank

goodness I did not blurt out: "*But you always say that you and Grandpapa were the most devoted couple in Carnarvonshire!*" I just held my breath, trying not to gape, while Grannie went on reminiscencing softly, for the first time since I'd known her, about something that I'd never heard of before.

"I was about a year older than you, Julia, and I was taken to a Primrose League Subscription Dance. In Beaumaris it was. My first dance. White was very becoming to me then, and I wore a spray of lilies of the valley, and I danced the Lancers in the same set as he was. . . . After that dance he secured an introduction. Mr. Smythe his name was. . . . He was only in Anglesey for fishing; an Englishman. A perfect stranger to everybody . . . dear, dear . . ."

Her voice was as altered as her face.

She said, "D'you know, I sometimes think what a wonderful expression that is, 'A perfect stranger,' for it is only the stranger who remains 'perfect,' I think. Into every woman's life he seems to come. To come—and to go. Only he never goes."

"What do you mean, Grannie?"

I don't know if she heard me.

Grannie said softly. "Dear me, yes. Perfect memories. One perfect waltz; an evening's talk. He told me women could be divided into two classes; charmiers and bores. So can men, I think. *The love who goes away before you've come to an end*; that's the real pharmer. That's what you remember. It comes back in music, it comes in dreams. It comes sometimes when the trees sway in the wind and the birds call. Sometimes it comes to you in the look in somebody's eyes. As it did to me this very afternoon, talking to that young man who might have been my grandson."

Imagine, I ask you, all this from the most conventional little old Welsh lady who ever kept a sprig of lavender in her prayer book to mark her place for the Epistle! Do you wonder that I was madly inquisitive about the young man who'd raised up these memories of perfect waltzes with perfect strangers in Grannie?

I asked, "What coloured eyes had he—the one this afternoon, I mean?"

Grannie said, "I don't know. One doesn't notice. I think they all have those eyes; those men with that charm. . . . Or is it the way they have with them? They make you wonder for the rest of your life, what they *might* have said, or done, or been . . ."

Then she cleared her throat and put her toque straight and spoke firmly, looking at me again. "Those are just fancies, of course, my dear. The other people . . . of course, they are your life. They're the better thing. You are much fonder of them; devoted. Remember that there is nothing in the world, Julia, that comes up to being the wife of a good man, and of doing your duty by him, and of having nothing to reproach yourself with in after years."

"I know, Grannie," hastily. I was afraid she might be going to drag in David Lewis. And, besides, what she was now being was just Grannie-Always, not that hint of Grannie-Long-ago which was so much more interesting. I longed to ask questions.

But she wouldn't go back again; why won't people? Just because they've been doing other things for forty-five years? Grannies and grown-ups complain that young people "won't listen" to them. But wouldn't they, to some of the forty-five year old

romances with which the young ones might even compare notes? Wouldn't it make a much more wonderful relation between the generations than that of the frog who said, "*I never had a tail,*" to the tadpole who retorted, "*I thought so; I always knew you never were a tadpole!*"

Or am I wanting the frogs—I mean the Grannies—to do impossible things?

Anyhow, I shall never feel as "shut up" before my Grannie again. Not after these confidences! Not after her being subjugated to-day, by a perfect stranger, just because his eyes and ways were like that Perfect Stranger in Eighteen-Sixty—Never-Mind!

I asked, "What's his name, Grannie? Where is that card of his?"

"Ah, I'd forgotten to look at it. I haven't got my glasses, dearie; read it for me."

I took it, quite excited to think that on Sunday next I should see this "Charmer" whose name I read out—

"Mr. C. W. Grantham."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROSE IN ICE

"Nay, though we sang as music in her ear,
She would not hear."

—*Swinburne.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

ON Sunday, true to time, this "Charmer" of Grannie's came to call. "Wonderful event!"

He was very nice; he couldn't have had a nicer way of taking Grannie's thanks; and he talked with a mixture of being quite at home in our old-fashioned drawing-room, and yet of feeling that he wasn't exactly a friend of ours, yet. He was interesting too, about his home, and amusing about the differences between London and Montreal, where he came from, and all that sort of thing. He didn't hurry away the minute he'd finished his tea, and yet he didn't say he "must go" and never get off, like some people. When he went, he said he'd enjoyed himself ever so much and that he hoped Mrs. Parry would allow him to call again, and to take us out to tea; and he left us feeling that we'd all had a very pleasant afternoon indeed.

Only—

I can't help saying that I was just a tiny bit disappointed in him.

What a mistake it is to give glowing descriptions of people beforehand to the people they are going to meet! From the way Grannie had talked to me about this Mr. Grantham, I was prepared for some-

thing so spectacular and fairy princely to come in!

What appeared was—just an ordinary fair-haired young man, rather taller than most, perhaps, and a good deal thinner.

Grannie had said she would describe him as “a very *elegant* figure and so exceedingly well-dressed.” But I like a man to have a chest broader than that, and I do not like him to have “a waist like a girl’s”—as it was called in the days when girls had waists like that.

“A most pleasing young countenance—a smile like the dear young Prince of Wales”—was Grannie’s verdict. But his face was too pointed, and too pale, and too—too much as if it laughed at everything, to please *me*.

Another thing in which Grannie hadn’t prepared me for what he was like, was when she told me that her new friend had “such a charming voice, with just a slight Canadian accent . . .”

Whereas from the first moment he opened his mouth to say, “Ah, how do you do—pleased to *meet* you,” with emphasis on the “meet.” Well! All I can say is, that if that were “slight” one wouldn’t be able to understand a syllable of what a “strong” Canadian accent said! You might just as well say that David Lewis’s Carnarvonshire accent was “slight,” or—

Or am I becoming horribly captious and fault-finding about a young man who was certainly nicer to look at than anything we’ve had in the house since the Mabel-party fiasco? A pleasant young man; and, what I’ve been thinking so important, a *young* young man!

Twenty-four, he told us he was.

At least twenty-four couldn't have held one at the font. Twenty-four had that "not-so-long-grown-up" look about the skin, and hair, and eyes, and smile, and movements. Twenty-four had that sort of nice fresh *smell* that growing plants keep (or ought I not to have noticed?). Twenty-four could chatter away about all sorts of silly things that one can't help being amused at. It's the plain truth that I honestly liked Mr. Grantham—for being twenty-four.

Am I ridiculous?

Or is it no more ridiculous than Grannie, who took this enormous fancy to him because she sees him like the Perfect Stranger who was twenty-four in Eighteen Hundred and Goodness-Knows?

(Later.)

Grannie, you know—well, I am surprised at her. I'm sure David Lewis would be more than surprised at the way in which she accepted at once this young man's invitation to take us both to tea at Rumpel-mayer's, his first free afternoon! (He told us that his work was on the railways and that very often he went at night, leaving most of the day free.) What's more, she quite fussed about our both being as "grand" as possible to go. I've never seen her make such a favourite of anyone as she does of this Mr. Grantham. Poor David Lewis's nose is completely out of joint as far as she is concerned. She scarcely mentions him now, or how we miss his coming in in the evening. What it is to have eyes like somebody's first love of long ago! All she says is, "Has Margaret got a bit of nice cake in the house, dearie? I have a sort of feeling that young Mr. Grantham may come to-day to ask about that cigarette-case he left on the top of the piano!"—or something like that.

(Later.)

You know, as I look back over the last fortnight or so, I can't help realising that we've been seeing a great deal of Mr. Grantham.

Or is it because we haven't been seeing anybody else?

No; what with fetching us out to tea, and then bringing those roses for Grannie, and then calling for the forgotten cigarette-case, and then with the box of extra-special "candies" that his mother sent from Canada, and that he thought I'd like, and then, returning a book he borrowed, and then coming just because it was Sunday (which he told me was "The Frozen Limit" in London), well, it has been quite often, hasn't it?

And I suppose Grannie and I ought to look upon it as rather a compliment. For it isn't as if he were one of these overseas men who are stranded in London, at a loose end with no friend's houses to visit. Mr. Grantham knows crowds of people over here; he talks about places in Scotland where he was asked to stay, and friends in London who go to such-and-such dances, and all that sort of thing. Yet he likes coming here. He says it's such a change and that we don't know how much it's meant to him, knowing Grannie and me; just now. He is only afraid that one of these days Mrs. Parry will get plum sick of seeing him sitting around here forever, listening to Miss Julia's songs. . . . When he says this kind of thing he has a way of putting his head on one side and smiling down at one as if he expected to have something nice said to him.

It generally is said, too; by Grannie. This young man winds her round his finger, after having known

us for only three weeks or so! He told her that it made him feel "like an orphan" to have her calling him "Mr. Grantham" all the while. Grannie, all pleased and fluttery, if you'll believe me, instantly dropped a whole row of stitches of her knitting that I had to pick up for her, and asked him what the "C. W." stood for in his name.

"Charles Wolfe," he told her, "but I just hate the name of 'Charles'; and 'Wolfe' kind of sounds like a reflection on the way I act at tea here. What I get from all my friends is my nickname—'Slim'."

Grannie, by way of making some concession to convention has taken to calling him "Mr. Slim."

(Later.)

I shan't call him anything but Mr. Grantham. I feel I don't want to. Is this "cussedness," just because I know he'd like me to call him "Slim," and to be much sweeter to him than I am?

Or is it my conceit to imagine that he does want me to like him, this stranger who has fallen bang into the middle of our lives like this?

No! Sometimes a girl just knows, that she isn't making any mistake. I know he wants to make me like him, that he likes me, that—yes! That he does think I'm a pretty girl, and that in spite of his being really attached to Grannie and always so prettily-mannered to her, it's me he comes to see.

That's just the funny obstinate conviction at the bottom of my heart. Nothing to do with Grannie murmuring to me one day, "My darling little Julia, do you know that that young man's attentions are really becoming very *marked*!" in a voice of scare, delight, triumph, and tenderness mixed. It was the

afternoon when he had come to take me to the Academy. . . .

Just imagine my being allowed to prance off to the Academy alone with a young man with Grannie's full approval. . . . Can it be me, Julia Parry, who used to be the loneliest girl in London and the one whose life was most absolutely devoid of anything to do with young men ?

Or is it some dream ?

The most extraordinary part of it to me is how I feel about it myself. Is it always like this when one's greatest wishes come true ?

When I remember how I used to think "*If I only had one single boy-friend that I could go about with, and enjoy myself with, even if it were only in quite a chummy sort of way, that would be so wonderful !*"

Now here it's come. Somehow it doesn't seem wonderful. It seems just . . . ordinary that I should be going about with Mr. Slim Grantham, whom Grannie considers so extraordinarily attractive. She's not the only one, by a very long way. I see people look after his tall slender figure in the streets ; a pretty lady who was having tea at the Academy near us was glancing across at our table all the time she was talking to the man next to her. I am sure that practically everybody thinks he's attractive.

Why does this leave me feeling quite calm ? Is it that I simply can't feel about men as other girls do ?

I thought that it was David Lewis being forty-eight that "put me off" those ideas. But here's an admirer (yes, to myself I may as well confess that I know he's an admirer) of exactly half that age. He doesn't make me feel any different. . . .

It must be me, then. Mabel at the office was once talking in rather a puzzling way about girls who "haven't got any falling-in-love about them, any more than some flowers have got scent. The brightest flowers, the prettiest-looking girls are like that sometimes," I heard her tell Dorothy. "My fiancé said that the girl could get as far as wanting to be always with the man, wanting him to take care of her, depending on him for everything, miserable when he's out of her sight, wanting him even to kiss her and to keep his arms about her—but not wanting *him*. A wash-out. That's why you sometimes see the plain woman scoring, if she's something to give. Those others have nothing——"

They'd left off talking about it when I came in, I remembered it now, that broken-off discussion, and it sent a little cold feeling of dismay all down me. Nothing to *give* a man. It sounded so drearily depressing. Oh, was I one of the girls like that?

Just as I was thinking this (we were still having tea at the Academy) the young man with me began speaking of much the same thing, almost as if he'd read my thoughts. Looking at my new pink jumper (a present from Grannie for me to look nice for the young man in), he began in the voice that stood out from the Londony chatter of crowds about the tables. "Say, Miss Julia, you look to me like a rose in that thing, if I may say so. A special kind of rose, though." I saw one once at a big tea some girls were giving donkey's years ago in the States; a rose in ice."

"In ice? How could a rose be?"

"Stuck into water, I guess, and the water frozen round it. It's turned out in a block of ice; there you see the flower frozen in the middle."

" But what for ? "

Mr. Slim Grantham put his fair head on one side and glanced over the table at me. " Why, to look pretty. Or to look so that folks would want to touch its petals and smell what its scent was for themselves. But—nothing doing. Ice between. Plenty of girls know that stunt, I guess. It's real successful." He put an elbow on the table, leant a little nearer, looked straight into my eyes and wound up softly, " Isn't that so, little Miss Rose-in-Ice ? "

I didn't say anything for a moment. I was angry, partly with him for trying to flirt with me, partly with myself for not liking it better, partly, oh, because of what Mabel's fiancé had told her. Then coldly I said : " You do think I'm a girl like that ? "

" Why, I wouldn't put it past you," said Mr. Grantham. But he smiled at me in such a way that somehow I couldn't be angry any more, and couldn't help smiling back at him, just a little, as we got up to go.

Slipping his long, young-looking hand through my arm to steer me through those crowds on the staircase, he said in my ear, " You can't guarantee that ice won't melt sometime, when Summer comes along. And the rose will be right there, I reckon, blushing and sweet. . . . "

He said nothing more about it. But I thought of it all the way home.

You see I'm afraid it's true. For some reason there is, all round me, ice. I feel it myself. Cold. Hard. Shutting me away. I wish—I wish it could melt.

If Slim Grantham could do that for me, I believe I should be as pleased as Grannie herself. But could

he? I had been thinking it quite, quite impossible. But somehow—ever since he said those things about the rose in ice, I've somehow felt as if I might come to feel differently about him. . . .

Couldn't that ice melt—for Slim?

CHAPTER XXIV

WRONG NOTES

"What will you leave your sweetheart,
Rendal, my son?
A rope to hang her, Mother!
A rope to hang her, Mother!"

—*Old Ballad.*

THE BOY'S STORY.

SOMETHING pretty ghastly has been happening to me since those first days of my being an engaged man and feeling so awful bucked about it.

Funny what a lot of these real "happenings" in one's life are things that don't go on in the outside world at all; nobody else knows anything about 'em. They're just the changes in one's own mind. Things one *feels*.

What I feel is that my engagement to Phyllis Carteret is—to put it plainly, a wash-out as far as my own private happiness is concerned.

It looks startling, written down like that. Enough to make anyone wonder "Why, what sort of a big let down has the girl given the young man, to make him alter in a few weeks like this?"

There hasn't been any "big let-down." That's the worrying part of it. I don't even know that I've "altered" a bit from what I've always been. I've always wanted Phyllis as I fancied she could be; *different*. Tender and sweet and serious as she was for those few moments when I proposed to her in the train. That was "my" Phyllis. Do you know, from that day to this, she's never been like it again? All the time since she's been just the gay Londony gi

who loves shows and dances and dashing about, and who reminds me of nothing on earth but "the Polly Wash-up"—the bright reflection from something bright that flits about over everything in sight and is never for an instant still.

All very amusing and jolly in a girl you're taking out to lunch. But in a sweetheart—well, would it satisfy you? And what about the sweetheart after you'd married her; supposing she didn't change much from that, even then? Can't help seeing it like these artificial fruits they get up to look so natural and juicy and tempting. Nothing but composition and colouring, really. Full of emptiness!

I believe it's something wrong with me, not being able to get at the real Phyllis. I always was a freak and a fool with women! Perhaps I never should "find my way about" with girls, perhaps any girl's ways would always jar on me. . . .

Tiny little pin pricks they've been that have managed to get me so raw; idiotic trifles that I'm ashamed of minding. Such lots of them, though. Too silly; one can't quote an example without feeling a fool. . . .

Well, to pick the first one that occurs to me. There was the evening that I came into Phyllis's "den" behind the big drawing-room at 99, hoping, since there was no dance or anything on, that I should have a quiet little chat for once, alone with her. But I found her in the middle of what looked like a sewing-circle. There were her sisters Daphne and Doris, come over from Wimbledon, and a girl from the dancing-class and a red-haired girl cousin of hers. The lot of them were sitting sewing and cutting out miles of stuffs of all colours of the rainbow, and chattering and giggling together like an aviary-full of parrots, so that

I felt it was no place for me, and pretty nearly beat it as soon as I'd put my nose inside the door. But up they skipped and dragged me in, and Daphne was very arch about what they were doing—sewing “undies” for Phyllis's bottom drawer, as you couldn't begin too soon when you meant to have a really Di-and-Duff trousseau.

“Quite the most amusing part of getting married, so I'm dashed if I'm going to be done out of any of it!” declared my fiancée, putting up her black bobbed head in a defiant way she's got. It means she's in a mood when she simply doesn't mind what she says; she'll quote from the most extraordinary French books that I don't think she ought to have heard of; she'll use expressions that sound absolutely “off” in a girl's voice; she'll even tell little stories that—well, I do wish she wouldn't. She seems to get reckless; can't think why. She'd one of those moments on her now, and I set my teeth, quite prepared to see her start one of her “imitations, very deeficult,” of a dance by Gaby Deslys—but, the imitation this time was of a shop-girl, full of airs, showing off some of those garments that they had been making. The other girls watched Phyllis, half-nervously, half-delighted, as she turned her nonsense upon me.

“Oh, yes, sir. Certainly I'll let you see our latest. Certainly we can have these”—she waved them—“embroidered with the R.A.F. crest. Hand-sewn throughout by our own workers”—a sweep of her arm towards her sisters—“best quality Scrape-de-Chene. Cut on such becoming lines, sir, are not they? Will you allow me to show you the same model—pass it along 'ere, Mademoiselle Doris, can't yer—in whipped

cream ? . . . Or, in the latest shyde ; Glad-Eye Blue. Our own name for it. . . . This is the nightie, sir, *en suite*. An acceptable gift to any lady, as I am sure you will find——*Don't* scowl at it, Jack," my fiancée laughed, "you'll make it shrink. Tell us which set you like best ; the blue with mauve butterflies, or the lemon with the black cat and the touches of jade ? "

I don't know which I said ; I cut it fairly short and went off to talk to Mrs. Carteret in the drawing-room. Silly, but I was sort of sickened. . . . Because—since we are on this subject—I don't think a girl's pretty things ought to be waved about anywhere for everybody to look at. . . . Besides which, personally I think they're prettier pure-white ; *not* all coloured, with pomegranates and black cats and blue birds and junk stuck all over them. I should have thought a girl's things ought to have reminded one of lilies.

That was that ; well, then there was the day when I seemed to get on my fiancée's nerves just as badly as she'd got on mine. It was on a Sunday when I'd taken her up the river. We stayed out there late. She was silent for once, and I hoped she was quietly enjoying the air and the rose and gold sunset over Richmond Hill and the soft movement under the boat. I'd always loved the river with old Tim. We'd had the punt together, you know.

I said, speaking as much to myself as to Phyllis : " Funny to think what people's real 'memorials' are. Not any old marble monuments or shrines or wooden crosses ; but anything that's nice to see and feel and hear and smell ; the jolly swims one has, tunes one likes, flowers. Laughter, and feeling glad one's alive. If they've shared those things . . . those bring back friends to you. You can't forget them while your own

body takes delight in things. Funny how things you enjoy must always remind you of people you've enjoyed them with."

But Phyllis sat up so suddenly that the boat rocked, and her voice, all peevish, cut through the evening murmurs.

"Really, Jack, you do have 'glimpses into the obvious,' don't you? And when will you leave off that trick of beginning every sentence with 'Funny how'? It's getting perfectly maddening!"

I stared at her; it was as if a spurt of bad temper had flared out of her that she had been bottling up. What had I done? I could think of nothing; I'd tried to do what she would like all day. Now she looked as if she hadn't been liking anything.

"Sorry," I said stiffly. I turned away to look at a boat with a girl and a fellow passing us, as we were moored under the willows. Those other two looked jolly contented. Not thinking what I was doing I began to hum under my breath a scrap of that song that Slim had done to death all last winter.

*"Give me a bench for two
Where we can bill and coo,
And mine she's bound to be——"*

"Oh, don't!" burst in Phyllis, sharply.

"Don't what?"

"Don't sizzle under your breath like that. Irritating little ways you have!"

"Sorry," said I again.

Funny conversation for people who are supposed to be engaged lovers.

There wasn't much more conversation of any sort

until we were in the train going home. Between two stations we were alone in the carriage. Suddenly Phyllis moved across to me.

"Jack," she said, in a funny sort of determined voice, "It's I who ought to be sorry. I've been horribly cross all day, just because I—I happen to have a headache. Dear old thing, I snapped at you for nothing. I'm a little beast. I must be different. I will. Will you kiss and make friends?"

Of course I was glad enough to make friends. I'd been just hating everything. I put my arm round Phyllis, and ducked carefully under her hat (she's left off the one with the wings, but every hat she ever wears seems to have a plane or an egg-whisk or something on it that jabs me in the eye if I go near her). Then I kissed her.

I hoped that everything would be all right after this, but nothing was meant to be all right, that day.

For Phyllis drew back her head suddenly, wrinkled up her nose, gave a shake of herself all over, and laughed, "What a dud kiss . . . reminds me of somebody cautiously brushing a midge off!"

"Oh, does it," I said, nettled a bit. I held her round the neck and kissed her again, "good and hard" as Slim would have said.

Would you believe it? That didn't seem to please her any better. She pulled away from me and said, "And that's like trying to rub a smut off my face!"

She gave an exasperated laugh; and said, "The fact is, my exemplary Jack, you haven't got a notion how to kiss a girl, or take hold of her, or anything!"

"Daresay I haven't," said I; put dead off. "I told you ages ago that you were the first I ever had kissed."

"Quite un-ness! You needn't have told me. I should have guessed," my fiancée said, going back to her airy manner. "Roughness without direction was the keynote of your method, my poor lamb."

I felt myself going pillar-box red to the roots of my hair. Sickeningly ashamed I felt; not of myself, but for Phyllis. No girl ought to talk like that, to think like that. It's all sort of wrong.

I said, looking out of the carriage window, "Making love to the person you care for oughtn't to be—to be a 'method,' I should think. It's not a thing that a man thinks out. It just happens."

"Exactly," retorted Phyllis, her head going up in the danger signal tilt. "That's why it so often happens all wrong. My goodness, why can't they have schools where they *teach* young men this kind of thing?" She rattled on in her reckless far-fetched way, not caring a rap that we'd stopped at Hampstead Heath Station and that several people had got into our carriage. She was in that mood. It's been growing on her lately, I believe. Can't think why! She just went on in the wildest way saying that tips about how to manage a sweetheart and to make her happy would be much more use in life than the things boys learnt for years about the Gallic Wars and Greek roots.

"The Greeks themselves were much more sensible about love making," declared Phyllis (while I quailed, and the woman opposite went on looking at the same page of *The Bystander* for what seemed half an hour.) "They knew that people had to be given *ideas* about what they were there for. Take that song of Bilitis that says, 'Love is a——' "

Thank goodness this was where we got out. I went back to my digs (after I'd seen my fiancée home)

feeling that the only thing to do was to break off this engagement which was only a nerve-rasper to both of us.

But in the morning I woke up realising that it's no such easy job for a man to break off his engagement with a girl without having any definite reason to give her. He's held back. Not by her, but by what he thinks of himself. And besides there were too many other things. . . . Her people, who'd all been so decent to me. I couldn't explain. . . . A fellow *can't* explain. What was there, after all? . . . Little things getting on each other's nerves . . .

There are "wrong notes" of one sort and another, in the harmony of every couple, I suppose?

I'd been expecting too much of engagement and having a girl belonging to me. I'd thought it would make a new Heaven and a new earth—and a new Jack Smith. These things don't happen. Anyhow, not to me.

I was disillusioned—well, there's only one thing for all disillusioned people to do. Make the best of it.

That's what I'd got to do, I told myself as I set off to the Carterets next day.

Phyllis was so quietened down from her reckless mood that I saw it would have been an awful pity to take those moods for something that would come into everyday life when we were married. After all, it was her feelings I had to consider. She was fond of me. Hadn't she said so? Chances were I should never get another girl to be fond of me like that. How much better off should I be, persuading Phyllis that our marriage would be a frost? Not a ha'porth. . .

At the thought of returning to that old loneliness I shivered ; always shall.

People talk of the girl you " choose," it's rot! You take the girl Life brings you. If she's not the girl of your dreams, well, you're lucky to get one at all.

Still I couldn't help smiling to-day when Slim Grantham told me that, in being engaged to the one and only girl I'd ever wanted, I didn't know my own luck !

CHAPTER XXV

THE FATE OF THE PHILANDERER

"So be warned by my lot (which I know you will not)
And learn about women from me."

—Kipling.

THE BOY'S STORY

SLIM, I must say, has been quite different ever since he came back from his holiday. In some ways he's another man.

I fancy he couldn't have enjoyed himself much, up in Scotland. He was staying with some cousins of the girl in the yellow frock (who has just gone back to Shanghai, I believe) and there was some other girl there in the place at the same time whom he'd known somewhere else and "things had got a bit mixed," as Slim hinted to me later.

"Keep a couple of days' journey between the girls you know; it's the soundest scheme yet," he told me. "You're pally with two: they're real good chums, get on together, let you think everything in the garden's going to be lovely because they don't resent each other. That's where you've got another guess coming to you. The girl who tells you '*Do have a good time with So and So, I'd never be jealous of her*'—Why! That's the girl who's getting ready to pick the other wench's eyes out with a fork. T'other girl rounds on you and says you've done this, that, and the other. . . . And life's a cheery mess! Watch out for it. But what's the use of wasting priceless advice?" he broke off, with a moody sort of laugh.

"You don't need any, lucky bargee! You've picked the thing to do. You're going to get on all right as far as the girl proposition is concerned!"

You can imagine how I stared at this, from him. We were sitting, by the way, in my little old digs that I've always had, and that I shall stick to now until Phyllis and I get married and have a home of our own. (Not bad little rooms at all they've been, and I was here with Tim . . . it'll seem rum, leaving.) Well, my fiancée had just said she'd a girl to see that evening and I hadn't been sorry for the chance to stay in my own place and read and turn in early for once. Then in had come Slim Grantham saying he was at a loose end (Slim!), and might he have a quiet smoke in here with me. He was looking fed to the wide, and as if he wanted to get things off his chest.

Which he proceeded to do; things that surprised me a bit.

That about *my* being all right on the girl proposition was the first startler.

"What d'you mean, you old humbug?" said I, throwing my pouch across at him. "You've all the luck there, as you know. Always have had."

"Here's where I pay for it," says old Slim, with that uncharacteristic expression of gloom on his face in the flare of the match. "Sooner or later everybody pays for that reputation of being Some success, with women. It's not any gaudy advantage."

"Get out. You've told me yourself that girls will always flock around where they know that girls have flocked around already."

"For a while, old horse. For a while, up to a certain point they'll all fall for the fellow who's known

to be a flirt. Maybe it's the tamer's instinct in 'em. 'We'll corral this philanderer yet,' they say. Maybe it's because they want to locate what it was that attracted the others," went on Slim, in a positively dreary voice. "Or maybe most girls know that every girl a fellow's known previously has managed to teach him something of how to please."

"There you are," I said a bit ruefully, thinking what a blank exercise-book my own fiancée must have found me. "You people have got a glamour——"

"Glamour nothing," from Slim. "A glamour that turns to a blight around the fellow! By and by the girls get it all right. '*Oh, yes, so-and-so who'd make love to a broomstick if it had a frill round it; not much of a compliment if he makes himself agreeable to me.*' That's the start in. Then we have, '*Pretty things he says—doesn't mean a syllable of them; we know him!*' When maybe it's something he's honest to-God; eager to make the woman understand. Later on we get to '*Yes; one of these men who love and ride away.*' That's what the peach of the bunch will be told before he's even introduced to her. And she, and the lot of 'em, are forewarned and forearmed, and there's the merely friendly smile over the cold shoulder for the welcome of men like me—say, old horse, I've loaded a few miseries off on to you to-night, ain't I? I'm no company for an engaged man, I'll say good-night, I guess——"

I made him stop. He couldn't guess that for other reasons I wasn't feeling much more exhilarated than he was in this new mood; I was jolly glad of the company of a man who might remind me I wasn't so un—I mean that I was in luck myself after all. Slim settled himself in Tim's old chair opposite to

me and went on with his grouse through the clouds of pipe-smoke.

"The lover who rides away.' Girls are scared of it. Most of 'em have had some, one time or another, from one or other of us," he said. "It gets about, how that 'riding away' hurts the girl, and they'll think about that riding more than they think about the loving. Spoils him for them before they start in. Like being told the egg ain't fresh. Presently, maybe before he's twenty-five, that fellow finds that for all the girls who've fallen for him since the time he left school, there's not a girl in the world he can think of who's gotten a downright genuine honest affection for him."

"Well, that's not like you, Slim——"

"Like me," he declared. "How are girls I know thinking of me now? Some are mad with me; some sore. Some say, 'Amusing, isn't he, but how could anybody take him seriously?' Some would love to see me come a cropper of some sort, get taken down. That's all——"

I laughed; couldn't help it. "Old man, d'you think you've got flu coming on? What's this sudden delusion?"

He shook his head. "Not so sudden. Been on me for weeks now. One or two things while I was away seemed to clinch it. I'm——"

He shrugged his slender shoulders and knocked out his pipe against my mantelpiece.

"Jack, I used to figure out that you were the fellow who didn't know much about life," he muttered into the ashes. "You'll never have made the scrap-heap of it that I have."

Funny how this cheered me up and made me feel

quite a lot older than Slim for once. I said, "Buck up! You'll be all right. You'll be getting fixed up yourself one of these days."

Slim lifted his head and looked at me. "I guess it would be no bad scheme," he said. Must say it took me aback a bit, from Slim, who'd always talked about engagement and marriage as if they would do all right when he was infirm and bedridden from old age and with nobody to look after him unless he bribed them with rings!

This same Slim gave me quite an apologetic glance as he owned up, "I've been thinking about that just lately."

"What! You have?"

"Sure."

"Found the lady?" I asked. "I mean, have you settled *which*?"

"I wouldn't put it past myself," said Slim, not too cheerfully. Then he roused himself just a bit to answer my questions about this new flame of his. Only he wouldn't let me call her a new flame; she was quite different from any of the others. In fact, it was because she was so different that she'd put the idea into his head that here was where he could get demobilised, so to speak, and could settle down into the job as a self-respecting married man. She—this different one—was a little Welsh girl, brought up in the howling wilds of the country but living in London now, with her grandmother.

"Gee, doesn't it sound different from anything you'd strike nowadays—'living with Grannie!'" said Slim in a satisfied sort of voice. "It surely does."

He went on to tell me that it was through her

grandmother that he'd got to know the girl. She—the old lady—had fallen down in the street in a fit or something, and Slim had picked her up and driven her home. And from what I could gather, had been putting in his time there ever since. "She" was eighteen, and her name was Miss Julia Parry.

"Pretty name, Julia," I said. "I don't think I've ever met a Julia in my life."

"You'll have to meet this one," said Slim in his friendliest way, "and tell me if you don't think I've picked out the right thing to do, for once in my life. She's just a shy, sweet little home-bird, Jack; the way girls used to be in the old novels, I guess. Real right through. You can see it in her innocent out-of-style blouses.* Taste in dress *awful*; face like a rose, blue-grey eyes like a little girl's——"

"Black hair?"

"Goldeny brown."

"It always used to be a brunette that you 'fell for,' Slim?"

"I tell you there's changes," said Slim, cocking his head to one side, but not in the old gay way he used to have. "This little girl of mine is a museum example. Quaint little sweet voice, sings her Gran-nie's songs; never heard of such a thing as a kiss—anyway she's never been kissed in her life. How do I know? Haven't I ever looked at her eyes, man? Never been kissed before, well that's a bit of a rarity nowadays when folks get fixed up. A man might well think a lot of it——"

"A girl wouldn't," I blurted out bitterly. Before I'd meant to say a word on this subject I went on, "A girl just throws it at a man if she's the first one he's kissed; laughs at him, tells him he ought to

have learnt things, says the keynote of his method was force without direction——”

I didn't mean to repeat a word of what my fiancée had been ragging me about. But I tell you that had stuck. Stung a bit, too. Wouldn't it sting anyone—any fellow out of our old “drome,” say? For an ex-pilot who was keen on planes and mechanism and engines, a man who'd been considered to have a pretty sensitive touch with those other things, to be put down as hopelessly clumsy, by a girl. . . . Yes, it stung. . . . “Force without direction,” indeed!

But as the words came out of my mouth, Slim threw back his head and suddenly laughed out, his old self again.

“Gee, that's great! That sounds like one of Phyllis's!” he sang out, gay as a lark. “‘*Force without direction*’ . . . if that doesn't size up the way eight out of ten Englishmen make love, or eight out of any ten chaps! I bet that would go straight home to the heart of most any engaged young woman who heard it . . . no—say, I was pulling your leg, old horse,” he caught himself up in a hurry as he saw me look black. “See here; about this little friend of mine. I do want to have you meet her——”

“Oh! Awfully kind of you,” I said, still a bit stiffly. “But——”

Slim was on his feet and had gripped my arm affectionately; I'm dashed if you can stay angry for long, with Slim

He said “Listen here, old horse; what about Sunday evening? I'm taking her to have dinner at the Dug-Out, with Lou and Son. You remember

them ; I took you there umpteen months ago, and they've asked me lots of times if I was ever going to bring you again. Come on Sunday."

"'Fraid I arranged to go to 99——"

"Bring the fiancée along with you. It's ages since I saw Phyllis—or must I say Miss Carteret, these days?"

"Ass!"

"All right, then ; bring her around about half-past eight, will you? They'll be real pleased to see her too," Slim assured me. "And then you can both have a look at my little girl! Say you'll come," old horse."

Before he left I promised, for Phyllis too.

CHAPTER XXVI

MOTHER-WINGS*

"A mother's lot, my dear,
She doth in naught accuse—
To have, to hold, to bear, to rear,
To love—and then to lose."

—*Jean Ingelow.*

THE BOY'S STORY

WHEN I accepted for Phyllis, I wasn't sure, after all, that she would come.

Knowing that she didn't seem to care for Slim Grantham at all, and that she never missed a chance of getting in a dig at him whenever his name came up, I thought it more than likely that my fiancée would cry off directly about coming on with me to the party at the Dug-Out, which was more or less what he'd call "his rag."

↳ Rather surprised I was, and bucked, when Phyllis quite jumped at it.

"Come? To see the adored Slim and his very latest? Oh, rather," she exclaimed in her brightest way. "Sight I wouldn't miss for worlds, the all-conquering Slim at the chariot-wheels of the girl who's different from the others. How priceless! Is it a definite engagement, Jack? Does one lug in the heavy congratulatory touch the moment one sees the young couple?"

"Oh Lord, no, I don't think so. I don't know that Slim's even asked the girl to marry him yet. But this is the girl that he's going to ask, 'all right.'"

"And, of course, she's going to jump at him all right: he takes that for granted."

"Well, I suppose he knows whether the girl likes him; a man like Slim doesn't make mistakes there." I stood up for the absent. But Phyllis shook her bobbed black hair at me in the way that means she finds I'm hopelessly obtuse in some ways. She asked quickly, "And the faultless Slim, is he really, definitely, and irrevocably in love this time?"

"M'm," I said, trying to make up my mind about that look on Slim's face and that tone in his voice when he was unloading himself to me in my rooms. "M'm. . . . I don't know whether a man like that, who's always dotted about all over the place does ever fall 'irrevocably' in love with anybody?"

"Then why on earth should he want to marry?" asked Phyllis, sharply.

"Because he thinks it's time he did get fixed up, I suppose. Because he thinks he'd like to take a wife back from this country——"

"Back? Is he going away to Canada, then, soon?"

"Yes, dear. He's off in about three weeks—didn't I tell you?"

Phyllis gave that impatient little shake of her hair. "You never tell me anything," she exclaimed—which wasn't fair, because, dash it all, I do tell her heaps of things—and besides, she's never been interested to hear about Slim before. But somehow women always do seem interested in this one subject. If it's an engagement, whoever of, whoever to, they seem to make up their minds that every detail of it must be absolutely thrilling. Yet lots of them are engaged themselves, they ought to know that it's an everyday sort of affair often enough. Funny!

But since my fiancée wanted to talk about Slim's coming engagement, I told her as much as I'd thought about it. "A fellow of Slim's make-up often puts it off until he's old and crusty and lonely—and loneliness is what he bars more than most things. Slim's warned in time; knows he's got to have a home of his own and a girl in it——"

"Not specially this little Welsh girl, whoever she is?"

"Oh, yes! Her specially, because she's what he called a 'sweet little shy home-bird,' with 'innocent blue-grey eyes' and 'old-fashioned songs' and 'a face like a rose,' and never has been anywhere or seen anything."

"I simply must see her for myself!" declared Phyllis laughing; quite excited she seemed about it. "What fun it'll be! When are you calling for me on Sunday, Jack? Half-past eight? Right!"

Quite settled, I thought it was. So I was a bit put off on Sunday evening, when I called at 99, to find that Phyllis "was very sorry, didn't think she could manage to come after all."

She'd got a bad headache and was lying down upstairs, and she'd left the message with her mother. Mrs. Carteret I found alone on the big couch in the drawing-room when I went in.

"A headache? Oh, I'm sorry," I said, but somehow or other I felt—out of the atmosphere, out of the look on Mrs. Carteret's face, somehow!—that an excuse had been made for Phyllis not to see me, and I felt sore about that, a bit of the soreness got into my voice as I stood there, looking down at her mother, and said, "She's had these headaches rather often lately."

Mrs. Carteret looked quickly up at me and said in her gentle voice. "Yes. Yes. You know Phil does get them. . . . Poor child. . . . She's had them badly since that very sharp go of influenza early this year. You know, Jack. That time when we had to cut her hair off."

"I didn't know she'd ever been so ill that you had to cut her hair off. I thought she'd just bobbed it. She never told me. There are lots of things *she's* never told *me*," I said, thinking of her reproach the other day.

Phyllis's mother still looked very gently and steadily up into my face. Then she moved a little on the couch and patted it.

"Sit by me for a minute, Jack. You haven't any special time when you must be with these friends of yours, have you? No? Then you can spare me a minute. That's right. I wanted a little talk with you."

Well we had the little talk; funny how it made me feel more sort of smoothed down and quietly happy and content to carry on as best I could. Mrs. Carteret just is one of those people who can make other people feel like that. Didn't say much either; just began about whether we'd had any little tiff, Phyllis and I? And when I told her not to-day, but how I was afraid I did seem rather to get on Phyllis's nerves, she, Mrs. Carteret, held my hand and begged me to believe one thing: *Phyllis thought a great, great deal of me*. She knew that Phyllis knew her best chance of happiness was with a man like me; loyal and true, and—oh, things that brought a big lump into my throat, and made me feel an ass, and yet rather pleased with myself at the same time.

"Phil has that airy, daring way of talking. What does it mean? So little, so little! The child loves to try and shock people. She's a little tired of—er—trying it on me," said this gentle lady, with quite a school-girl's twinkle in her grey eyes, "but I've seen you 'rise' to it, Jack; often! Making her worse!"

I laughed.

"That's better," said Phyllis's mother. "For do you know, dearest boy, I think I would rather anything happened now than that anything should come between Phil and you."

"Sweet of you. Well, nothing shall."

"It's my great wish that you should be married soon. Better for Phil. For both of you! And—d'you know, perhaps I'm going to let out a secret before I should. . . . But shall I tell you? Yes. You know I came in for a legacy the other day. I'm going to use it to make Phil an allowance which, with what her father can give her, will make it quite possible for you to get married, without waiting. What do you think of that?"

I was so confoundedly touched by her sweetness and by her wanting me for her son-in-law at all, and by the way she spoke to and looked at me, that I couldn't say a word; I just grabbed up both her hands and kissed them, and she kissed me (first time she'd ever done it) on the hair.

"So that's all settled," she told me, with her dear eyes bright. "It's nothing to thank me for, Jack. I shouldn't want to do it if I didn't feel you were the man to make a girl happy."

"Mrs. Carteret," I said, all huskily, "as you aren't shocked at anything, I can just tell you that I hope

you'll be able to say of me what they put on the cowboy's epitaph :

*' He done his damndest,
Angels can do no more.' "*

After this I left her. And as I tell you, went off towards Baker Street still full of that " All's right-with-the-world " feeling. It was just like Mrs. Carteret's sweetness to think out a way that could hurry up my marriage to her daughter. The money part I hadn't been worrying about ; but it would be a great scheme if we could get settled without dragging on for a whole year. By the time I was in the tube I had come to the conclusion that the only thing that had been worrying me at all was the length of the blessed engagement. Hadn't I heard plenty of fellows say that the engagement was " a wearing kind of time ? "

That, I began to think, was all that had been getting on the nerves of Phyllis and me. When we were settled down, then we'd both be better tempered, and have a bit of patience with each other. She wouldn't shake her head at me when I didn't seem to see what she meant in one ; and I shouldn't set my teeth when she did imitations of Teddie Gerard and talked " undies " before a roomful of people. She was fond of me ; hadn't her own mother said that would be all right ? And wasn't I very lucky in lots and lots of things ? Evidently it wasn't in me, even as much as it was in Slim, to fall in love irrevocably with some girl that I'd got to have or die. One has dreams ; but they are dreams. . . This was what I was thinking to myself as I got out at Baker Street Station and took the turning towards the Dug-Out.

I didn't let myself think—as it struck me for a second that if I were in love with anybody over there at 99, it was with Mrs. Carteret, just as much as with her daughter; more, Mrs. Carteret was the sweetest ever; and I told myself that her daughter was bound to turn out like her in some things after all, once she was married. I started seeing Phyllis in my own mind as I'd never seen her before; a bit like Mrs. Carteret to look at and to talk to. I'd never felt so tender to her (my fiancée) since the day of our engagement. Phyllis! She could be very sweet. (By jove it was Tuesday when I saw her last.) Everything would be all right as soon as we were married. I wished we were married.

Happy? Yes, of course I'd be able to pull off making her happy all right, thought I as I rang the bell of this house where the party was. One thing she'd always be sure of, would my wife. Thing I knew lots of girls would be anxious about at the bottom of their hearts when they thought about marriage and husbands. As Slim had said, "it's a jealous sex." Well! my wife would be able to bank on my never looking at another woman. Why should I even want to? Look at girls?

What girls would be anything to me?

. . . . I'd hardly finished thinking this, I suppose, before I found myself bang, crashed into the middle of All That. . . .

Now. . . . How am I to pull myself together to explain what came first, and how. . . .

The party. . . . yes, Mrs. "Lou's" party at the Dug-Out. Of course the tiny room was packed. A bunch of frocks and faces. . . . I don't believe I saw more than a glimpse of them all as I came into the place.

The one girl on whom my eyes were instantly fastened must have been standing up, nearest to the door. Can't say. Don't think I even saw what colour she was wearing; I don't know what it was. Just her little face; that was all I saw.

For one second I fancy I may have asked myself, "*Where've I seen her before?*" Before the second passed, I knew.

She was that girl at the beginning of this story of mine. The girl I used to pass in the street, the girl I couldn't get to know, the girl I'd spoken to, the girl who'd turned me down. Yes. No mistake. She was the girl I'd written that mad love-letter to; that I'd burnt.

"My little lady!"

There she stood before me, the only girl I'd ever wanted in my life!

CHAPTER XXVII

MEETING.

"We met; 'twas in a crowd."
—*Song.*

THE BOY'S STORY.

NEXT to hearing that my pal Tim had gone West, it was the shock of my life—meeting that girl, that evening, at that house.

You remember "The Dug-Out"; the little ground floor flat of the boarding-house near Baker Street. Place where they kept the piano in the bedroom and shoved the piles of dinner-plates out on to the corridor floor, and had the whole show choc-a-bloc with old furniture and young people. The place where I—the one fellow in London without a girl to give him a smile—had been taken so long ago by Slim Grantham.

Extraordinary, that it should be here that I must meet her again. Now—when everything was so totally different. Me, changed into quite a different sort of fellow, and she——

She was different, too. Before, I'd only seen her with her hat on in the street. Now I saw all her hair. . . . I stood looking at it without even having said "Good evening" to my hostess, and I saw she was not just pretty. . . . she was lovely.

As I still stood gaping at her (thank goodness I'd come in so quietly that the mob hadn't noticed me) it all started to soak in, so to speak. . . .

Back, as if it were all only yesterday, back came

those old meetings every morning for weeks; back came the image of her that I'd taken to my lonely digs at night, back came my worryings about how I was to get to know her, and my hatred of the way these things had to happen or generally did happen. Then, more distinctly than all, came that fatal morning when I'd taken my courage by the scruff of the neck and had spoken to her. . . . And my black despair. And the letter, miles long, that I'd written to her that evening. . . . and that I'd shoved into the fire. . . .

I'd burnt it, because I'd thought that to write all that Dream Island rot to a girl whose name I didn't even know was too idiotic. . . . Now the feeling took me that *that* hadn't been rot. It was only everything else that had been idiotic. That other had been the right thing. . . . Back it crowded upon me in one, as if nothing had happened in between. I didn't know her name even yet. That didn't matter; nothing mattered except being able to look at her, long and hard, once again. . . .

What woke me from my dream was the voice of my hostess close to my ear. "Ah, here you are. And how is Mr. Stranger Smith? Where's Phyllis? It's such ages since I've seen her. . . . What? Haven't you brought her with you?"

I pulled myself together, jerkily I managed to explain about my fiancée and how she sent her love and was so awfully sorry she couldn't come.

"Oh, yes! *What* a pity," exclaimed little Mrs. Lou, standing there backed by that crowd of other people. (Can't tell you now who they all were or which of 'em I'd seen before. "Son" was away—there were other men.) "I want to hear all about it. I do hope it's not going to be a long engagement?"

No engagement ought to be longer than three weeks."

"Sure! 'One to be steady, two to be ready, three to be off,' eh?" This was a gay well-known voice that broke in. Slim Grantham came up and took me by the arm.

"Hullo, Slim," said I, mechanically.

For the whole of that evening I was fated to be saying something with my lips and something else with my heart. At that moment all I was gasping out inside myself was "*My little lady! She's here; she's here. . . . I thought that old dream was absolutely done in. But she's here. . . .*"

Slim, absolutely unconscious, went on cheerily to me. "Hullo, old horse. Say, here's this some one I wanted to introduce you to. Step over all these people on the floor and come along."

He swung me round; led me. . . . I found myself facing . . . Her. The girl!

"Julia," said Slim's gay, careless voice, "here's my chum, Jack Smith, that I've told you tons about." Then to me. "This is Miss Julia Parry."

I wonder I didn't stammer out aloud, "*What? No. It isn't. It can't be.*" That was what I gasped in my heart again. For don't you see? "Miss Julia Parry?" Why that was the name of the girl Slim had told me about that night he'd come to my rooms to get things off his chest. It meant—it meant she was the girl he—Slim—was going to marry. She!

I'd thought her being here at all was the shock of my life. . . . Child's play to this. . . .

I'd read of something taking a man "like a blow between the eyes." That's right. It does happen so. It got me just like that. But with this going through

me like a knife through an apple I believe I did manage to go on looking just as usual. . . . Even above the infernal pain of it I was already thinking quickly, "*What have I got to do now?*"

One obvious thing to do was to pretend I'd never seen her before. Had never passed her every morning and got by heart every curve of her little face, every tint of rose-and-cream in her cheeks, every move of her walk. I could pretend to forget the morning when I'd spoken to her, and when she'd stabbed me with soft grey-blue eyes all turned to ice and granite. Because I hadn't been introduced. Now, when everything was no earthly good, I'd got this essential, this indispensable thing, the proper introduction to the girl.

"How do you do?" I said, savage, but in such an outwardly ordinary way that it quite took me aback myself.

"How do you do?" she replied in a soft quaint little voice. Imagine it, I'd never heard her voice before. Her expression was as ordinary as my own. In her face, sweet and rosy and serious, there wasn't a trace that she'd ever set eyes on Slim's friend Jack Smith, before. Or if she had flushed up a bit to a deeper rose, that might have been the heat of the little Dug-Out packed with all those people.

Did she really not remember?

Or was this her hint that I'd got to forget too?

At this thought something "rev'd" me up again like I'd been all "rev'd" up to face that horde of half-mutinous men that night at the station. *And I knew I meant to find out if she remembered before I left that room.*

All this time, you know, the chatter and stir of the party was about me; somebody'd squeezed through

into the bedroom and started to play one of those deafening tunes on the piano—not that this drowned the talk. People just raised their voices. Out of the din I caught a scrap in a man's voice. "I tell you what any love-story means: Somebody, sometime or other, has got to be *hurt*."

Then Mrs. Lou's voice put in, very carrying, "Well, if there's any hurting to be done, *let my children do it!*"

(I saw her look up at a framed snapshot of "Son" that hung above her writing-table; in swimming-kit the square audacious fellow stood all wet and laughing, poised on a little landing stage.)

"Ruthless idea, Lou!" somebody cried. Then somebody else, a woman, "Sounded like a prayer. The prayer of any mother, I suppose. 'Let not my baby be touched! If he must lacerate other hearts *tant pis!* but let him be spared pain. His be the trampling foot, not the neck trampled upon——'"

Found myself wondering if my own mother would have hoped that for me if she'd stayed alive.

"Don't argue," begged another somebody—an alive-looking woman in all-jade-green. "*Don't* analyse. Psychology's all very well in its way, but not spoiling love-stories. Nothing messes up Love like too much 'mentality,' that some people are always prattling about; it only means the muddle-headedness of people who can't *feel!* . . . Let's stop wrangling. Can't somebody sing?"

Everybody began scrambling to their feet and making a move to the music-room-bedroom.

That is everybody made it except Slim and the girl.

A new notion took me.

I'd stay behind with them.

I just would.

Slim would be mad at my "messing up" his tête-à-tête. But he'd asked me to meet his Miss Julia Parry after all, and I jolly well would meet her.

Lord, how I hated Slim at that moment. He'd always been a pal of mine all right, but I tell you I wouldn't have minded if a bomb had dropped on him then and there, provided it wiped him clean out and left no trace on the carpet. Also I'd have felt lots better if I could have got my teeth well into his throat and a thumb into each of his eyes. Why should one man be allowed to do all the hurting? . . . Well, I couldn't go for him as I should have liked: we're supposed to live in a civilised world now. . . .

But as the others jostled one another out of the room, discussing what songs who knew, I just hung back. Then I planked myself down on that old Chesterfield on the other side of Miss Parry, where she sat by Slim.

Close to her I was, and I meant to make something of it while it lasted.

I meant to make her speak to me. What conversation had I had, so far, with the girl of the little quaint soft voice, the only one I'd ever want to listen to?

Total: one "Good morning" (to which, as the telephone girls say, there was no reply). One conventional "How do you do?" in reply to mine. With luck, perhaps, there'd be a "Good night" when I left.

I could have laughed, it was so little. No, dash it! I'd come across her again by a sort of miracle. I wasn't going to let her go again without taking any

notice. And much I cared if Slim Grantham was there, lolling on the Chesterfield on her other side.

Squadrons of Slims shouldn't stop me now.

For now I meant to speak, and to get at least a glance of understanding from those deep soft eyes, a word that meant something from the flower of a mouth.

I turned to her so quickly that the draught stirred that curl on her cheek, and I said exactly what I should have said if the other man hadn't been there.

"I've seen you before. Haven't you seen me? Don't you remember?"

And I looked her straight in the eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PARTING

"How shall I live without you?
How can I let you go?"

—Song.

THE BOY'S STORY

Now, as it happened, I saw afterwards, when I came to think it over, that for once in my life I'd said exactly the right thing.

If there had been any misunderstanding about the way in which I'd spoken to her that morning long ago, this cleared it up.

A rotter, after all, wouldn't have mentioned it to her now.

I could see by the way her sweet flush deepened again, and by the ever-so-quick little way her eyes widened as she looked up at me, that the girl saw it too.

"Have you forgotten?" I said.

Again she gave me that precious little look. She had to answer. I was hanging on it.

"No, I haven't forgotten," was what she said. "I know you quite well—by sight."

Here Slim struck in with a surprised "Hul-lo?" He cocked his head to one side and pulled his usual jester face at me. "You didn't tell me about this. *Quel pro chaine*—what next? You two have met, then?"

The girl sitting between us said nothing. I fancied she made the slightest movement of her goldeny-brown head; not a nod—was it a turn towards me? As for me, I don't know how I should have answered.

But I didn't have to say anything to Slim. At that moment Mrs. Lou fluttered back into the sitting-room.

"Miss Parry! Please. We do want you," she coaxed. "Slim said he'd made you promise to sing to us to-night. One of your Welsh songs. You will, won't you?"

I could see the girl wasn't accustomed to singing before a lot of people by the diffident way she looked up, said "Oh—" and hesitated back against the cushions. . . .

I'd risen. Suddenly she got up too. "That's right," said Mrs. Lou. "Give us all a treat!"

We followed our hostess into the bedroom, where it was cooler and fresher than in the tobacco-smoke clouded sitting-room. The window stood wide open. People were sitting about on the bed, on the arms of chairs, anywhere they could find.

A man sprang away from the piano where he'd been still making an unearthly din; he left the music standing on the rail. Everybody looked up at me—at the little girl.

Without any pressing, she walked straight to the piano and sat down on the stool.

Then she looked round at me; yes, at me. It was right to me that she spoke, too, though I expect everybody thought she was addressing the whole roomful of 'em.

"This is an old song we have called *Bugei'lior Gwenith Gwyn.* 'Watching the White Wheat,' is what it means. I'll sing it in English," quickly and shyly.

Softly she struck a few running chords. I don't know by what kind of wireless I got it. But I felt

in my bones that that song was for me, for me. It wasn't to give them all a treat that she sang it. It wasn't for Slim. It was as she might have made a little peace-offering or gift just to me whom she'd cut long ago. She meant it like that. I knew. Don't ask me how. You can't argue about these things. Spoils things to argue and analyse as that woman had said; that's the "psychology" that mucks up everything. I didn't want to reason or discuss. I just listened as her voice slid out into the song.

Ah, how it got one by the throat, a tune like that coming after all the shrieking, rollicking jazz-music of a moment ago. Every other sound was hushed as her voice rose, threading the notes clear and sweet, and soft as a runnel of rain-water.

*"More fair, more fair each day that goes,
Or fonder grows,
My passion!
Ah, pity me, for him whose grace
Thy bonnie face
Did fashion——"*

Those were some of the words; and the wistful tune will stick in my mind for ever, with those chords which seemed to make the piano into a harp.

Every nerve in my body seemed to vibrate to it. I'd sat down by a corner of the bedroom fender. Not a thing did I see of the rest of the party. Only that little girl on the piano-stool, with her back to me all the time; but, as I mysteriously knew, singing for me. If I'd shut my eyes I should still have seen the glimpse of her softly-straying hands on the piano (where the jazz-folio was still set up) and the sloping lines of her shoulders under her pale frock, and the

nape of her neck, white and soft-looking as curd under her goldeny-brown hair. Somebody once told me that the French consider the nape one of the prettiest features of a woman's person. . . . I've never been interested, you know, in any of their talk about women. But I remembered this now. . . .

I wonder the little girl didn't feel my eyes fastened upon the nape of her neck as she sang.

That song of hers. Do you know where it swept me away to? My island. My wonderful dream-island that I hadn't dreamt about for years, and that I hadn't allowed myself to think about for months. As the music rippled all around me, so there seemed to ripple about my feet the magic waves of that sea which cut off my island from all the world except me and one other person. My little dream lady! She was there too, to-night. Only it wasn't night. It wasn't even dawn as it always was in my dreams. It was day; day that turned the sands to gold at our feet, and the sky above us to other soft hazy gold, so soft, so-faraway, so dreamy fair that no horizon came up to put any definition to its fairness; one could not see where sky ended or sea began. Unreal beauty, but real to me while that music lasted.

The last chords of her song died away. People clapped——

Clapped!—That song which had spread about, for me alone, a paradise of magic and infinitude, and golden warmth. . . .

Then came my icy-cold douche. In the stir and chatter that followed the music, Mrs. Lou came and sat by me, holding out her cigarette for me to give her a light. "And I've scarcely had a word with you after all," she complained in her kind-hearted

way. "Now tell me, when is this wedding of yours coming off?"

Wedding! Of mine——!

Any wedding whatever was the last thing that I'd been thinking about.

I'd spoken to my little lady—my only little girl—out of mad impulse. I'd looked myself away with her into a dream paradise for two . . . I'd forgotten everything else.

Certainly I'd forgotten Phyllis Carteret, and that wedding which Phyllis's sweet mother had hastened on for me at the beginning of this very evening. It was, of course, Phyllis whom I was to marry. And shortly too. . . .

I can't tell you what I answered Mrs. Lou. I suppose it passed muster, and that I told her about Mrs. Carteret's generosity and all that; for I heard her say, sympathetically, "Ah, that's good, isn't it?"

I wondered how often congratulations and interest, and "so glad's," are poured out upon engaged men who all the time are only wishing to Heaven that they had never in their lives set eyes upon the face of the girl whom they are arranging to marry almost at once?

I hadn't set eyes upon Phyllis Carteret that time when I used to see this girl—the only girl—every day.

And she, my little lady, hadn't met Slim then. Funny to hark back and think that even then I'd wondered "How would Slim get to know a girl like that?" of her.

My eyes had strayed away again. She was putting on her hat in front of the glass.

I can't tell you how each little movement seemed to make her sweeter. A rose out of reach, that was what she was. . . . In my misery I scarcely heard the buzz and rustle of half a dozen people at once getting ready to take leave. I didn't see them shaking hands and throwing on wraps. I only saw the girl pinning on that hat to cover that lovely hair which was strange to me; drawing on the coat over her frock that I hadn't seen her wear before, hiding the nape of her neck that had been an unguessed-at beauty to me before that evening. Back, she'd changed herself back into the girl of whom I'd thought (the first day) that she was like a flower growing out of a mud-pie. I hadn't known her then. Well, now I'd got to know her she was just as unobtainable, for me.

Why had we ever met at all? I should never be able to forget her again now; engaged, married, or as an old man, I should have to live on and on, thinking hungrily of the girl I'd missed.

Much better if we'd never met!

The sharpest stab of the whole works came at the end.

This was back in the little sitting-room where she said "Good night." In her hat and coat again, as she looked on those mornings of old, Miss Parry (I supposed she would have to be Miss Parry to me until she was Mrs. Grantham) turned to Slim.

"I'm ready," she said softly.

"Right!" Slim returned, smiling as he held the door open.

She passed out under that long arm of his.

His! . . .

My God! My God! Why hadn't he married her and taken her out to Canada without my having set eyes on her again?

Slim's mother, if ever she'd breathed that ruthless, womanly-prayer, might have seen it answered at that minute.

"Let *my* child do the hurting . . .!"

And I didn't see how that hurt in my heart was ever going to leave off. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MATE

"Farewell ! thou art too dear for my possessing."
—*Shakespeare.*

THE GIRL'S STORY

I SHAN'T be able to go to sleep at all to-night, I know.
I feel as if I shall never be able to go to sleep again ever.

Far too excited I am ; far too much to think about ! A month of nights wouldn't give me time to think it all over.

As for letting Mr. Grantham see me home after that party, I couldn't do that either. I asked him to put me into the only cab we could find, an antediluvian hansom that was rocking down Baker Street, and then I made him say good night.

"Good" night, indeed. Sleepless night, extraordinary night when I've made a discovery about myself for one thing ! I am grown up. Six months ago I wasn't. All these months I have been growing bit by bit into a woman. This evening at the party settled it

So, lying here quite still on my bed, with my eyes staring out into the darkness, I've been going over and over everything that happened.

Or would some people think that nothing extraordinary happened after all ?

I was taken by a man *I* know to see some people *he* knows, and amongst the people *they* know I met a

young man whom I neither know nor don't know ; a stranger whom I used to pass in the street every day as I went to the office, and who had once said " Good morning " to me.

A little coincidence : That's all there'd be in it for some people.

But I can't help seeing it as the most wonderful thing that's ever happened in my life.

When Slim Grantham talked to me yesterday about his chum Jack Smith, and what a first-class fellow he was and how I'd have to meet him—well, I listened quite interestedly to his description of this Jack Smith who was engaged to the daughter of the man who audited the accounts of the Great Intermediate Railway Company for them. " A nailing pretty girl and fixes herself up well, though off-hand in her way, whiles," Slim Grantham said. He also told me again the story that I'd heard before, of the quite young railway official who had practically stopped a riot of troops at the station one night months ago. That was this very same Jack Smith, who was going up by leaps and bounds in the railway world. I was interested to be going to meet him, of course. I wondered, as one does when one is going to see any new person, what he would be like to look at. . . .

How could I have guessed that I had seen him already ? How should I have dreamed that it would turn out to be no one more or less than—my Silver Badger of those long-ago dreams ?

My Silver Badger !

I wonder I didn't say it aloud when he came into that crowded room.

Really, I think human beings are wonderful in the

way they can go on looking as expressionless as cows when all the time emotions are whirling round inside their minds like snowflakes in a blizzard. That was how I felt when he—my Silver Badger—was brought up to be introduced.

As I stare out into the darkness I can see him again now; broad chest, dear schoolboy face, little scar that looks like a cleft in his chin.

In the silence that broods over this sleeping house I can hear again the tone of his very ordinary and correct "How do you do?" Then that other voice, determined and a little appealing too, in which he said to me, "I've seen you before. Haven't you seen me, too? Don't you remember?"

Ah, how could anybody help thinking the world of him for saying that, in that way, just then?

It set everything right that had worried me about that morning long ago. (But I'd known it was all right! I'd known that all this time!)

Just after he said that this evening, and when I was asked to sing, I felt I could no more sing than fly. My heart was thumping like a sledge-hammer right up in my throat.

Or is that wrong anatomy?

It really felt like that.

For just think of the shock I'd had. And then think how I'd been sitting there forcing myself to look "usual" before a crowd of strangers for half an hour. All that time my Silver Badger hadn't taken his eyes off my face.

Or ought I not to have noticed that? Would it be more "maidenly" to pretend now to myself that he was not looking at me?

I can't help it; he was. All the time his blue eyes

sort of held on to me as hands might have held. Even when I didn't see them, I felt them. I felt them when I sat down at the piano with my back to him. I wonder they didn't scorch two holes in the nape of my neck as I sat, singing to him.

Thank goodness I managed to sing better, after all, than I've ever sung in my life before. I wanted to; I meant to. It was for him.

It was the only way I could sort of get near him.

You see, I couldn't explain to him in words how splendid I thought him. His joining up at seventeen; his fighting, his flying, his wound, what he'd done later at the railway . . . and also how sweet and how right he'd been about me. I couldn't *say* that.

I felt that if I could sing to him—even though I only sang the first little simple old love-song that came into my head—it ought to tell him.

I believe he knows. I believe he knows everything. What "everything"?

Why, just the everything that makes all the difference in this world; the everything that had disturbed me since I first saw him among the omnibuses and the coloured advertisements and the hurrying business people of the London street; the everything that had made me miserable so often since then because I didn't see him any more. The everything that shows me we were meant to belong together, this one particular Silver Badger and I. . . . The hours have been slipping past as I think and think and think of him. . . . In the darkness of my room a line of dove-grey light is showing now under my blind.

Still all I see is the bright crowded room I left behind hours ago, and the tall boy that I have never forgotten all these months that I've never seen him.

Yes, of course I've pretended that I've never thought of him.

I've pretended so hard that I even pretended, persuaded *myself* that I'd done it. People can do this. Aren't human beings wonderful? Talk about schools and colleges—what are they? Places to pack young people off to get them out of the way while they're growing out of their clothes. One learns nothing at school. One only learns when one comes away and goes out into the world and meets a human being whom one can love. It's this human being who teaches one everything. And the chief things one learns are not things about that adored other human being. They're about oneself. It's been like that with me.

There's the staircase clock striking half-past something. Three, I suppose. With every minute now I feel surer and surer about something.

The strongest, strangest influences in one's life are not always those of the people around one that one sees every day. They can be those of personalities passed and recognised for a moment. Without my having set eyes on him all these weeks that Silver Badger has mastered my days, altering them in ways that one would never have guessed. It was because I'd seen the one and only person who could be to me all people mean when they talk about "one's mate"—it was because of this that I've not been able to put up with anything else. It was the idea of him (all hidden away, of course) which made me see that things like kindness itself and That Bag can no more make a girl happy than a husband who's never there. It was the secret memory of how young that Silver Badger looked striding over the pavement with the

morning sun in his eyes which convinced me that one can never make a sweetheart out of a considerate old family friend who had held one at the font. It was he, who knew nothing about David Lewis! who had broken off David's engagement to me. I'd thought for a time that it was only the disparity in age and that what I wanted was a lover (any lover) of my own generation. But now, after the first glance and word from my Silver Badger, that mistake is shown up for ever.

Slim Grantham? The right age; gay, good-looking, nice to me. . . . but not right for me. Happy with him? I never could be. I could never in this world now be happy with anybody but the Silver Badger.

Jack Smith. How wonderful to know his name at last! Jack Smith was the sweetheart I was made for, and he for me. . . .

Yes, but wait, wait, wait. . . . The clock grinding out "four" outside my bedroom door seemed to strike deadening blows upon my heart as I remembered what had got blown aside and crowded out by all these other thoughts.

How could I think of Jack Smith as my sweetheart? He was engaged to be married.

Hadn't I known all about it? Hadn't Slim told me that Smith's fiancée ("a nailing pretty girl") was the daughter of the accountant of the Great Intermediate Railway? Hadn't I been there when Slim's friends asked my Silver Badger when he was going to be married? Hadn't I actually heard him answer, "Almost at once"?

That ends it. That ends it. Even the clock outside ticks ponderously to those words, "That—ends—it."

Ends something else, too. All idea of my marrying anybody, ever. I know that far away in Carnarvonshire David Lewis is cautiously biding his time, thinking that some day, somehow, some side wind will make me drift back to his unfailing kindness and him.

After meeting "my boy"? Never, never; rather nothing at all.

People in books and plays are always so sorry for the unwanted girls, the bachelor women, the spinsters who have "never met their mate." . . . How do the pityers know, always, that this is why those women are not married? Perhaps it is because, like me, they have met the mate and he is not for them. And rather than spoil the memory of him and what he might have been, they'll take nothing, nothing. . . .

Past four o'clock in the morning and the London sparrows cheeping outside on my bedroom window-sill.

To-day Slim Grantham is coming to tea again. He is thinking of asking me to marry him. I know he is. Since I knew, in a single evening, that I was "grown-up" at last, I've suddenly known so many other things. He'll ask me.

Perhaps I could have said "yes" last week, two days ago.

Not now. Now a dream will never leave me. But I shall have to stay lonely for it. I shall have to grow old myself into one of the pitied spinster-women.

I don't think they need pity us so much. To some of us that one glimpse of the mate has been more wonderful, more beautiful than years of most people's marriages. To some of us a word, a look, a dream

has meant that the happiness of fifty years has been concentrated down into one evening. (*"D'you get me, Steve?"* as Slim says.) I'm sure that's been so with me. I'm sure. So sure that—that I think I can even turn round now, curl up, and go to sleep on it at last.

CHAPTER XXX

REFUSAL

—"For me no more with you,
Not while I live, not till I die!"

—*Swinburne.*

THE GIRL'S STORY

As soon as Slim Grantham came into the drawing-room to-day, I knew that I'd been perfectly right, and that he was going to ask me.

Grannie saw that, too. For after we'd had tea she stayed down in the dining-room and allowed "the young people" to have an ever so much longer *tête-à-tête* than in the days of David Lewis. For Grannie now simply adores "Mr. Slim," and cannot make out why her dear little Julia is not more enthusiastic about him.

"Were I a young girl, now——" Grannie says, winding up her sentence with a three-volume novel condensed into one wistful sigh from a little old lady.

She doesn't remember that I wasn't a young girl myself in sixty-what-what, when she waltzed with that perfect stranger of whom Slim so constantly reminds her. Besides, she never saw my Silver Badger.

After that meeting with him last evening, after that night of thinking, thinking, thinking about him—the one person in the world—and of coming to so many new and definite conclusions, it was almost like going back a couple of years to sit and listen to Slim Grantham's talk.

I'd always been amused by it. But I wasn't to-day. I think it wasn't only because of last night that it didn't seem amusing, all this that Slim was telling me about his home-folks and his journey back in three weeks. I think he was "not on his day" for conversation. There was a nervousness under that quick Canadianly-accented talk of his, as if he were working himself up to something. He was, I knew.

And in a grown-up sort of way that I shouldn't have been able to manage at all when first I knew him, I found myself debating whether it would be kinder *not* to let him come to the point and be refused, or better to let him have it out and get it over.

I wondered if I could manage a mixture of the two ways, which I suppose is the best way of refusing a proposal. . . .

I'm rather pleased with myself because I did do this.

Slim was sitting beside me on the couch showing me some snapshots that had filled his letter-case—snaps of the people at home sleighing and ski-ing—all looking most attractive, I must say.

"Lots of fun we have in the winter, over with us," he told me. "I guess you'd have a corking time if you came over." Then he laid the hand holding the snapshots on his knee, and turned to me with his fair head very much on one side and an almost earnest expression in his nearly-always laughing eyes. He dropped his voice as he said, "How'd you like to live in Canada, Julia?"

I sort of gathered myself together for what I had to do. I picked up a snap showing Slim in sweater and skis, backed by a snowy slope of a hill bristling with pines; and I said, quite composedly and firmly,

but quite gently, "Do you know, I don't think I should care for it at all, Slim."

He cocked his head towards the other shoulder and said, "Now, why?"

"It's so far away, for one thing. I should be too homesick for the sight of things I'm accustomed to. I always miss my Welsh mountains in London. In Canada I should miss Wales and London. There'd be nothing that I should be accustomed to, right away, over there. I don't feel it's the life I should ever want. . . ."

"You don't know that," put in Slim Grantham quickly, but a little blankly. "Lots and lots of girls from this country have been coming over to us since the war—how many thousand was it the other day? These Canadian brides settle down and get used to it all right. Get to feel it's home, after a while."

"I never should."

"See here. Don't you think," said Slim persuasively, "that what makes you feel a place is home is just who you happen to be *with*?"

"Yes, I do feel that," said I sincerely. For I knew that the bottom of a coal-mine would be made to feel home to me if I were there with the Silver Badger. But I saw a brighter look suddenly cross the face of Slim Grantham, and I knew that I must not allow that to be.

So before he could speak I said hastily but quite firmly, "You see, there would be nobody in Canada who would make it feel home to me."

Pause for a moment.

Then Slim asked, with a sort of half-twinkle in his eyes, "Nobody?"

"No, Slim."

The twinkle vanished. Another pause. Slim, looking grave, surprised, and rather unbelieving, said, "Why, I'm sorry you feel that way."

"I'm sorry I do," said I, very friendly, but quite convincingly. "But nobody can help these sort of feelings, and it is a mistake to pretend they aren't there if they are."

"Sure," said Slim slowly.

Yet another long pause, in which I felt *awful*. Then Slim cleared his throat, lifted his head and said in a much brisker voice, "Still, there isn't any real rush to say good-bye right here and now, I guess. That walk of ours still stands, I hope?"

I'd forgotten that walk.

It had been an arrangement of Slim's some days before. I'd said how I had been longing to go into the country for a lovely long tramp now that spring had come at last. Of course, I'd been thinking of the roads in Wales, winding between our moors with all the glory of the gorse. On every steep slope now there would be crowded the cushions of bloom, dazzling gold against the rich blue sky, and so full of scent that it takes one's breath away. I longed to be walking there all among the plovers and peewits and tiny white Welsh lambs. And Slim had talked about taking me out into Surrey somewhere and having a long walk on his first off-day.

"It was for to-morrow," he reminded me now. "You were to meet me at Waterloo at one o'clock. Don't say that's off too. I'd been looking forward to it; I certainly had."

He sounded so dashed and disappointed that I couldn't help feeling rather a little beast. I realised that he had been counting on me. He'd thought I

would be glad to go with him, not only to Surrey, but away from our dear Old World, overseas, anywhere. . . . I must have given him the impression. For not only did he sound dashed, but also so very surprised, puzzled, hurt. There was a look in his eyes as if—as if some one on whom he'd put every trust had let him down.

He said, quite lately, that "*women don't take much stock in him.*" . . . Now I'd shown him that this was quite true as far as I was concerned. And he'd thought he could count on me.

Oh dear! . . . What a *tiresome* world! . . .

Full of things that are such a pity!

I wish I could have done something to help this. . . . Go to Canada with him I never could. Well, I'd made him understand that. Now, was there any reason why I shouldn't go into Surrey with him, for just one last afternoon together? No.

Of course, it's still amazing to think that Grannie is now quite willing to let me go out for the whole afternoon to Surrey, or Nova Scotia, with a young man, provided that young man is Mr. Slim Grantham. Personally, I would rather wander out quite alone into the country under the freshly green trees, where I could have woven my day-dreams about my Silver Badger.

But there's no need to grow selfish and ridiculous even if one is going to be an old maid. One will have to think of other people; and I could see by his face that I had hurt and jolted this young man, who, after all, had paid me a big compliment.

So, as nicely as I could, I said, "Oh! if you'll take me, of course that appointment stands. We'll go to-morrow; I've been looking forward to it too."

"Fine!" said Slim, brisking up once more and making me feel just a little frightened. How difficult men are when one's trying to make them take "No" for an answer! Was Slim like David Lewis in thinking I didn't know my own mind? Do all men think that of all women who won't love them? Did Slim think he would be able to persuade me on that walk? I suddenly had a feeling that his mind was full of that thought, that he was planning it all out already. . . .

But before he said another word about anything, the really interesting event of the whole afternoon began to happen. Or am I unnatural to think that anything can be more interesting than talking to a man who wants to marry you, even if it's the wrong man?

Well, at all events this that came next was more interesting to me.

Slim's letter-case had fallen off his knee as he spoke and had scattered the sheaf of snapshots, cards, and letters over the carpet; he knelt quickly down to pick them all up again. I helped him; collecting various sledging scenes and skating parties that he had brought on purpose to show me. The last photograph I picked up was of a group in fancy dress.

"I hadn't seen this," I said, looking at it. "Why this is you in a jester's costume, and oh—oh!" This cry broke from me quite suddenly in surprise as I looked more closely at the photograph. What struck me was the figure in fancy dress next to Slim in the group and perched upon the piano. A girl all black; representing Night or Black Columbine or something of that sort. I hardly looked at her costume, but I recognised the way she held herself

the pose of her head—and her face . . . ah, yes, her impishly-mischievous, alive-looking face! I should have known it anywhere for the face of that stranger girl to whom I'd talked in the empty dancing-room, weeks and weeks ago.

"Why d'you say 'Oh,' like that?" asked Slim, looking up at me in astonishment.

I explained to him excitedly. "There's some one else I know here in this photograph. I mean, I saw her once. It's that girl who was so dreadfully unhappy because she was engaged to the wrong man."

"Girl? Which?"

I pointed to the gay, piquant face. "This one on the right, sitting on the piano."

Slim gave a look at the photograph as I held it. "That? Why! Why, what are you talking about? That's Phyllis."

"Phyllis?" I said.

Slim went on, with a laugh. "Phyllis, 'unhappy'!"

"Well, but she told me she was," I said stupidly. For the second afterwards I saw what I had done. This girl had confided in me that evening just because she thought I'd never meet her people or anyone she knew. Now it turned out that Slim Grantham knew her. And I'd given her away to him; I'd let him know what she'd said to me. . . .

Slim turned his bright quick eyes on me as I sat with my hands caught up against my cheeks, blushing with confusion and anger at myself. "What's wrong?" he asked abruptly. "And where did you see Phyllis when she said that to you?"

"Oh, Slim, forget I said a word!" I begged him. "I ought not to have said anything; it was in confidence."

"Cut it out; I'll never open my mouth about you," said Slim, suddenly interested. "Tell me, where did you meet her?"

"Oh, dear. I only met her once quite by chance, and we talked. . . I never knew her name, or she mine."

"Yet she thought you were old friends enough to tell you she was unhappy!"

"I ought not to have let that out——"

"It's out now," said Slim, nodding at me. He took up the photograph that had fallen from my hand and looked at it. Then he turned to me and spoke in the voice I'd heard the first time he had to coax Grannie to let him take me out to tea.

"See here, Julia. I'd hate to ask you to tell me anything you think you ought not to. But I promise you honest to God that you shan't be sorry if you'll tell me a little about this. Maybe it's the kindest thing you could do. Will you? You've handed me one rather hard answer to-day, little girl."

"Yes. I know. I'm sorry, dreadfully sorry." I told him, feeling flushed and flurried. "I'd like to do anything to—to—to do anything. But you see, this is something to do with another girl——"

"Maybe," said Slim's most coaxing voice, "you'd be helping her too? There's a lot of misunderstanding about this delightful old world of ours that could be cleared up with just a few words, sometimes—by some one who knew."

I thought of how often I'd longed for one word of explanation with my Silver Badger, after that awful morning when I had to cut him. I said to Slim, "Yes; I know there is. But I don't see how you could do anything for that girl."

"Try me out," said Slim, quite seriously. "I might throw some sort of light on it."

Another thought struck me. "If I don't tell you, though, exactly what it was about this girl, you know, you might get the story wrong and think everything was quite different."

"I surely might," agreed Slim. "So, Julia?" Whether one wants to marry him or not, he remains a most persuading kind of creature! I found myself beginning the beginning of that story of my slipping off to the dancing-class, and of my finding there, all alone in the big, empty, golden room, that solitary girl in black perched up on the piano. I told him everything she had said to me; I remembered it accurately, because it had made such an impression upon me. Slim sat in the other corner of the sofa as I talked, nodding his cropped fair head, and interrupting only twice.

Once was when he said, "Excuse me, but how many weeks ago was this? . . . Just when was it? Can you fix the date? Ah, yes. Just after I went up to Scotland."

The other time was when I repeated to him that girl's remark about men not wanting love; "*it carried them in too deep; they only wanted to amuse themselves surf bathing!*" Slim looked up with a smile parting his lips (which are rather too girlish and curly, I think) and said, "Aha! Yes. I got that said to me once."

"You knew her quite well, then," I said in dismay, "and I never knew."

"Maybe I didn't know her as well as I thought I did," said Slim, looking down at that snap. "She didn't say anything about 'force without direction'."

that time? No; that was just before she'd sampled it, I guess."

"What?" I asked, puzzled.

But Slim only asked me to tell him again about what the girl had said of the young man to whom she'd got engaged.

"I feel like '*Tell tale tit, your tongue shall be slit!*'"

I sighed at the end of all this. "I think we've both behaved horribly badly about a girl who trusted me, and who never thought you'd ask me about her secrets."

Slim, who had got up from the sofa, smiled down upon me from his miles of extra height, standing with a hand at his slender waist. "We're not such male-factors after all. I haven't told you her name; there's more than one Phyllis in London, I guess? I haven't said a thing about her. You've only told me one thing I didn't know."

This didn't seem to me to make things any better. Reproachfully I looked up at him. "And you haven't even told me if she did get engaged to that boy, or if she is still engaged."

"She is," said Slim cheerfully.

Then he said good-bye, after repeating the arrangement to meet me to-morrow.

Presently I watched him from the window as he crossed the street. And, to tell you the honest truth, I was just a little surprised at the look of him as he went on. The same lilt in his walk, the same gay, easy tilt of his head. Full of life and spirits, he looked as if no one had ever crossed him in his life.

Yet he'd just been turned down by a girl.

It couldn't have meant so very very much to him after all. In a few minutes he could forget. . . .

Very different from me. I shall have to remember, for the rest of my lonely days, the few words of a man to whom I shall never speak again !

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DAY COMMANDEERED.

" Ah, God, a poor soul can but thank Thee
For such a delectable day ! "

—*Kingsley.*

THE BOY'S STORY.

SEEMS to me that some things will just have to be given up as impossible.

You can't, for instance, take a folding pocket kodak and with that expect to get a perfect picture of the rainbow in all its glory. Same way you can't expect ordinary words to describe the absolute wonderfulness of a day like to-day has been. Even to say "like to-day" puts it all dead out at once. Because there never could have been a day like it !

Perhaps the best way is definitely to leave out how wonderful it was. (Anybody who's had any sort of experience will be able to share in that part for themselves by taking all they've ever felt and multiplying it by a million.) I'll simply and boldly put down the mere happenings.

They started by me looking in at the office about a quarter to one, to get a book I'd left there and wanted. Otherwise I hadn't any business there. Things were slack. Actually I'd no work on until it was time for the signalling lecture, which I was attending. My turning up at all that morning was a chance—if anything ever was a chance in this world.

In my old room I found Spurway on duty, the man who grows prize roses in his garden a little way down

the line, and who always comes up with a Caroline Testont or some outlandishly named bloom like that in his buttonhole, also Slim Grantham. Slim was in a fearful paddy because he'd been sent for by the superintendent of the line to report for some extra duty where an official had fallen through; of course this would happen just now, as Slim said, on his day off. He was cursing about it to Spurway when I opened the door.

"With an appointment that I have to keep at Waterloo in a quarter of an hour from now! The— the people will have started from home now. Can't stop them. Can't even ring up the house, they aren't on the phone. Gee whizz!" Slim was storming. "If this isn't just the luck that I've had for the last two months." This was where he turned and saw me.

It was after I'd explained what brought me there that the idea struck Slim.

"Gee," he exclaimed, gripping me by the arm. "If you've nothing else on this morning, old horse, you might do me the very best turn you've ever done anybody in your life. You're the very man. See here. . . . You've met her, haven't you?"

"Met whom?"

"My friend that I'd arranged to meet at Waterloo," gabbled Slim, evidently all hurry to be off. "Miss Parry—I introduced you to her, Sunday night at Lou's flat."

Something all hotly smouldering flamed up in me at her name.

Quite coolly I managed to get out, "Yes, I remember, of course."

"Well, see here, it's her. I'm supposed to be

taking her off on some picnic or walk or something into the country. This knocks it on the head," said Slim all in a rush. "You explain to her, old horse, you tell her I'm darned sorry and all that; not my fault. This Tomfool sending for me. You tell her, get me, Steve?"

I stood looking at him for a second. "Go to Waterloo instead of you?"

"You've hit it. Say, I'd do the same for you any day," Slim promised me. "If she—if Miss Parry isn't by the booking office she'll be waiting at the Haslemere and Portsmouth train. Give her my love and say I excuse me, Spurway"—here he laughed and grabbed the rose (Early-blooming Crimson Glory) out of the other man's buttonhole, "give her this from me."

He tossed the rose into my hand and was off out of the office and rattling down the stairs before I'd even said I'd go.

Was it likely now that I wouldn't go? Was it likely I'd miss the chance of seeing her, even if only for a moment, again?

Try and think what it meant to me!

"Cheero," I said to Spurway. Out I dashed, blindly, holding that fool rose in my hand; bolting for the nearest taxi:

"Waterloo. Drive like the devil," I said, and as I sat back in the cab I felt a sharp stab in my finger; I'd run the thorn of that rose deep in. It was only then I realised I had still got hold of it, grabbing it. I dropped it—then picked it up again and slung it out of the window.

Take her a rose, from another man? Oh no—thanks. . . .

To see her again. . . . Lord, what a bit of luck ! Almost too good to be true.

As it was I was mad afraid I'd be late. Supposing I was ! Taxi seemed to crawl. Supposing I didn't catch her in time ; supposing she gave Slim up and went home ! He hadn't left me her home address. Oh Lord, that would put the tin hat on it. . . .

But I was in time all right. At the sight of her standing there by the booking office, all sweet and neat in blue serge with that little purple hat that I knew framing her rose of a face, I felt it was more than I'd hoped for. At last—even if it was only for once—I had got the right to go straight up to her in a public place, to take off my hat and to greet her.

If I live to be a thousand I shan't forget her little quick surprise and smile and flush as she caught sight of me. I wished I could have told her so then and there all bang in the middle of porters, and "by your leaves" and people. But of course all I could say was "Oh ! Slim sent me to say he was so awfully sorry he couldn't," and so forth.

She looked about in a sort of blank little way. I fancy she just said : "Oh, did he ?" "Was he ?" or "Couldn't he ?" Those things.

Too idiotic to think that was all we could say to each other on this our one and only chance of saying anything at all. Too maddening this crowd, and—Oh ! Everything ! Why, why couldn't I be allowed to have her all to myself just for once instead of having to ask her if I could get her a cab or if I could see her into a bus, and then lift my hat and say good-bye to her for good ? Maddening. Yet this was what it would have to be.

"No, by Jove, it shan't be," I heard myself say

aloud quite suddenly. The little girl looked up, widening those soft grey-blue eyes of hers.

"What?" she asked.

It was then, you know, that I took hold, just as I took hold at the party when I insisted upon asking her if she remembered me. I felt the same as I'd done that other time at the station when I'd also taken on and telephoned and done Lord knows what on my own over the heads of my seniors. I acted on my own now, fairly sweeping aside, I suppose lots of things that ought to have prevented my saying what I did.

"I say! Slim said he was taking you out into the country for a walk; well, he can't, but it's a lovely day, and I wish you'd let me take you instead. Won't you? Please do."

She looked at me, in wonder, I expect. That adorable little flush crept up to her eyes. I could see I'd absolutely startled her.

"Oh," she began.

I made certain she was going to say she couldn't, but I wasn't going to take it for an answer. Carry her off somehow I would whatever she said. However she ended up with the most wonderful little catch in her voice.

"Oh! How lovely! Yes; thank you very much."

I turned to the ticket office. "Where was Slim going to take you?"

"I—I don't know," she said.

Here I did remember that Slim had babbled something about the Haslemere and Portsmouth train. So at random I said, "Two first to Haslemere, please." Didn't think of my "privilege," but planked down two notes.

In a dream I held the carriage door open for her. Her! I was going out for the day with *her*! I nudged myself to try and realise it while it was still going on. We'd a carriage to ourselves as it was a midday train, not crowded. We didn't talk much there though. Just the sort of things that people do keep on saying for no earthly reason, it seems to me, except to prevent the noise of human speech from ever ceasing. Things about the country beginning to look very pretty just now, doesn't it? And about wondering whether we should soon have a change in the weather; it felt rather like thunder, and what was the glass doing? The farmers at all events were crying out for rain. . . . That sort of thing, you know. With, just once or twice, a flash of something that really meant something.

For instance, when I was letting the window down again after we came out of a tunnel, I met her eyes, blinking in the sudden sunshine. We both smiled together into each other's eyes. In a second I found myself bending forward and saying to her, "And I was afraid you wouldn't come!"

She said, "You knew I'd come!"

Then something seemed to take my breath away, hers too, for we could neither of us speak.

Quite soon after that, though, she pointed out of the window at the railway bank sloping steeply up, all green and gold with grass and flowers; and she said in a tea-party voice: "Oh look; cowslips! The first I've seen this year."

"By Jove, yes, so they are," I answered her, just as if she were any girl I'd met sitting there in the corner-seat opposite to me—any girl!

The only other girl I'd sat with in a railway carriage, on this very line, too, was Phyllis Carteret. Then I

thought I needn't remember Phyllis, my fiancée, at all to-day. This was an odd day that need not count. A day commandeered. A day stolen from fate, sort of. Not indented for. The one day of my life that, by a stroke of luck, I was able to spend alone with the one girl that I'd ever want to be alone with for ever.

Slim's girl . . . ?

This thought suddenly took me by the throat, spoiling everything again. Shutting me up. . . you know I felt the whole time, the weight behind me of those other days when I'd seen her, and those nights when I'd thought of her and only her. These clamoured to be talked about. These thoughts would be with me all day. And how could I speak of them to her? Mustn't. Yet how could I keep them decently shoved to the back of my mind for the rest of the time I was with her? Couldn't.

It was going to be an infernal struggle. I felt it coming on. Flying in the teeth of the wind wasn't going to be in it.

She, serious and sweet, said something about how lovely the dark copper beech looked in among the young green of the other trees, reminded her of some place or other in Wales. I began to answer her conventionally enough about Welsh scenery, but that snapped off on my lips as I—well, I sort of dropped for a moment into a kind of air-pocket of not being able to stick this, and I found myself rapping out instead quite savagely.

"Slim needn't grudge my having this one little trip with her. He'll have all the other days——"

She took me up so sharply it made me jump.

"Indeed he won't," she cried, quite angrily. "He won't, indeed, I——"

She broke off as sharply as she'd broken in. All over her face and her sweet-round throat she flushed, so that I wasn't able to look at her any more. I stared out of the window, my heart hammering. I felt that if I said anything just then I'd say everything which was impossible. Yet I thought I'd have to die if I didn't find out what the little girl meant by her last sentence.

Presently I got it out, so suddenly, that I'm afraid I made her jump in turn.

"What did you mean by what you said just now?"

Funny how I only called her "you," I felt I just wouldn't ever say "Miss Parry" to her, even if I mustn't use any other name. Only my heart was full of "Dearests" and "Darlings," struggling to be whispered to her.

She didn't answer my question, for just here was where we got into the station. It was she who had to remind me. "Isn't this where we get out? Look, this is Haslemere."

For some time after we got out we didn't talk about anything—I mean of That in the background, though it was gathering, gathering like clouds, that must presently burst into storm and flame.

I just said to the little girl, "Hadn't we better try and raise some lunch at the pub here? Aren't you hungry?"

"Starving," she said.

We both laughed. That did seem to push back, for a time, those other things. Made everything more normal. We'd lunch. Cold meat, rhubarb, cheese, cider. Tea for her.

Then we started off for a walk. We got to the back of the little town, left the houses behind us. I don't

know now where we got to. There were green lanes with May-bushes and lilac stuff, and we passed crowds of Canadian soldiers from Bramshott Camp. We turned off the road and got into a field somewhere.

Forgetting that what we came out for was a long tramp, we sat down under the hedge. I can't tell you how sweet and "right" she looked in the open and all among the buttercups. . . . To think that but for a chance she'd have been out here with Slim ! To think I might never have seen her except in town amongst crowds !

"It will rain before we get back, I am sure it will," she said, raising her face to the sky. "At home, on a day like this, the mountains would look so near that you'd feel you could touch them from the window. Then, in one minute, down would come the rain and blot everything out. I do feel thunder quite near now, don't you ?"

I heard myself say quite roughly. "Yes ! I do." Not meaning the ordinary thunder at all. Meaning the storm inside myself that had been gathering steadily since I set eyes on her at Waterloo. It was getting too strong for me now. How was I expected to sit there and look at her little face against the sky and leaves ? How was I expected to talk to her about weather ? It broke out of me. "Look here. What *did* you mean in the train ?"

She turned her face to me but not her eyes. That little catch was back in her voice. "Wh—which ?"

"When I said Slim needn't grudge me this one day. (You know). When I said he'd have all the other days, and you said, 'Indeed he won't !' What did you mean by that ?"

She'd been picking a little bunch of buttercups and white earthnut, and she put it together ten different ways as we talked. She said, with her eyes on the flowers, "I meant just what I said. He won't, wh—why should he?"

To this I meant to answer gradually, getting by degrees at her point of view. Because, after all, what she'd just said didn't tell me definitely whether she was going to marry the fellow or not. Funny how words got caught away from my lips and my own thoughts insisted on being spoken instead.

I broke out, "Are you going to marry the fellow or not?"

She gasped. "Slim Grantham?"

"Slim, of course."

"Slim? Marry him? No!" she said, shaking her head quite violently in the little purple hat. "Never. Of course not."

"Honour?"

"Of course I'm not going to!"

She was flushed deep rose now, but her eyes looked straight into my face, and I felt ton-loads of anxiety and misery roll off my chest. It was as if a blessed lark began singing inside me the words, "*Of course she's not going to marry Slim! Of course not!*"

I said, loudly and quite reverently, "Thank God." Don't know what I should have said next.

It was at that moment that the clouds broke and the storm was down upon us. Meaning this time, not the storm inside me, but the thunderstorm that must have been coming up at a fearful lick during those last few minutes, when I'd been too absorbed to notice what was going on in the mere world.

Suddenly cold, came the wind through that hedge.

Thunder muttered and rang first here and then there like guns following the flight of a plane ; then, down lashed that rain upon us.

Up I jumped and caught the little girl's hands to help her to her feet.

"Look here, we'll go to the nearest place to shelter," I said. "You'll be wet through!"

I think she said something about wet never hurting her and not mattering—her voice was lost in the hissing rain. Wet through, indeed! She was that in two minutes as we ran towards the lane, I holding her by the hand.

"Good Lord, you're soaked to the skin," I said, blinking the drops away to look at her; her little jacket was like a coat of wet paint upon her shoulders and her serge skirt clung and flapped. "Look here, we'll make for the nearest house to dry in. There's one behind those trees in the field there; I see chimneys and white windows. Come on! Just across this field here. There's a gate. Can you climb it?"

She climbed to the top of that gate and I caught her, just a little wet bundle of serge and silk, as she dropped to the ground. Then we ran, still under that downpour; we ran up a streaming path between two ponds, all gleaming white and whistling under rain. . . . I suppose I ought to have recognised those ponds bordered by rhodos and bamboos, and the little dinghy. Well, in that rush I didn't. I didn't seem to take in that I'd ever seen before the odd bungalow house with its white balcony and long windows opening on to a wide veranda! All I thought of at the moment was somewhere where the little girl could get in and take off those dripping things before she got cold . . . I dashed with her on to the veranda.

There were umpteen white pillars with climbing roses, but I couldn't spot any door into this place, nothing but windows.

I rapped at one of them. I hollered out, "Anybody there, please?"

The weirdest little figure ran up from inside and pressed against the panes a face painted all over with patterns of blue and scarlet. It wore a head-dress of bright-coloured feathers and a miniature Red Indian's suit, with moccassins. At the sight of us dripping there on the veranda-tiles, this apparition stared a second and scooted back again, calling shrilly, "Mams! Open the window! Quick, it's a surprise!"

The surprise, I can tell you, was for me.

For directly that window was unfastened and thrown open by a very tall woman in land kit and a battered white felt hat. She gave a glance as quick as a bird's from the little girl to me; then a quick little smile.

"Hullo! Come in at once." She held the window open, still looking at me. "You, is it? It would be," she laughed. "Do come in, Jack."

I'd recognised her just as she said, "Hullo." Phyllis's eldest married sister. The Blurter!

CHAPTER XXXII

WORDS AND MUSIC

"My love is like a melody
That's sweetly played in tune."
—Burns.

THE BOY'S STORY

AWFULLY decent she was to us.

In one, she'd packed me in to her husband's room, and had thrown dry clothes and a khaki tunic, and a hot peg, and a comb and bath towels at me; and had sent her kids staggering down into the kitchen under all our wet things, to stick in front of the range—all before you could say knife. With the other hand, so to speak, she swept off the little girl (whom I'd hastily introduced as a friend of my friend, Mr. Grantham) and attended to her.

I changed and went down into the long low-roofed drawing-room where I'd sat before and talked to Phyllis's sister. The place was all dim and green like an aquarium because of the trees pressing up near the windows, and it was full of the scent of azaleas in bowls on the book-shelves, mixed up with the smell of the wood fire that had just been lighted, and the other smell of green bushes under the rain outside. Down I sat in a big chair near the red-tiled hearth and talked to the two kids—one in his Red Indian kit, the other in a grown-up's swimming costume draped about him—who were squatting on the hearthrug.

The Red Indian said to me, "I knew it was you

when I saw you coming up through the rhody-denyons. I knew it was the flying man——”

“D’you remember doing the parachute with us off the haycock?” piped up the smaller kid. “D’you remember?”

I remembered something else, too, as I was talking to them. I remembered that rum sort of presentiment that I’d had when first I set foot inside this place all those Sundays ago. Hadn’t I thought, “*I’m going to be happy in this place some time. Live one of the red-letter days here.*”

A red-letter day all right! All these hours—with her, knowing that she wasn’t Slim’s girl at all! Having heard her say so!

Fact remained, of course, that I wasn’t free myself. I was engaged to be married almost at once to the sister of the woman by whose fireside I was sitting at that moment.

But—steady on, though. Marry Phyllis Carteret? No, not if I were fated never to marry anybody else in this world. Phyllis? Not with all this other seething in my heart. (So this was what they meant by passionate love). Not with me so suddenly woken up to what everything did mean.

I’d met my sweetheart, whether or no I was to have her.

As for the other: a beastly wrench was ahead of me. Ghastly explanation with Phyllis, with her mother (ah, that would hurt!), with Mr. Carteret. Had to be. Couldn’t be helped.

And after that . . . ? I almost shivered, clenching my nails into my palms with feeling too deeply what might come after my way had been cleared. Try my luck with my own girl? . . . Not yet, of course. Some time hence. . . .

One thing, of course, I was quite firm about with myself. I wasn't going to start making love to her until I could do so with an absolutely clear sheet. Until it was all off with Phyllis I wouldn't say a word to Her.

The drawing-room door clicked—one of the many funny things about that house was that every one of the umpty-two doors had a latch like a farm gate instead of a knob—and our hostess brought my little girl in.

She—the little girl—was wearing a borrowed^d pink velvet tea-gown affair that could have gone twice round her and have covered a settee as well; the folds of it trailed behind her on the floor and drooped down from her white neck and hung over her fingers and made her look like some sweet little mediæval lady; she and our hostess were laughing over it as they came in.

"You can't talk of the deadly monotony of modern dress after the variety of costume to be seen in this house," said Phyllis's sister, going down on her breeched and booted knees to stir the fire. The Indian Chief being in her way, she shoved him off the rug with her land-boot as if he'd been a puppy. Kid only beamed amusedly all over his scarlet-and-blue patterned face and trotted off as his mother ordered him, to hurry up the tea.

We had tea. Don't ask me what anybody talked about. Our hostess did most of it.

Not a bit surprised did she seem to see me sitting there again, not only not with my fiancée at all, but with another girl altogether.

Took it as a matter of course. Then I remembered how last time she had told me to come again, even if

I didn't come with Phyllis. Without meaning to, I'd certainly taken her at her word. But what had made her think of it?

Presently the Blurter got up and said, "The rain's stopped; look here, I shall have to leave you and catch the gardener before he goes. Excuse me for a few minutes, won't you? . . . Cigarettes on the mantelpiece. And do play the piano and all that, won't you?"—this to that little girl in the rose-coloured robe. Then she strode out at the window, the two kids pattering at her heels.

I got up and went to the piano at the other end of the room, thinking of the last time I'd heard the piano played at Mrs. Lou's flat. Quick as lightning another thought came to me.

I gave the piano-stool a twirl or so, and glanced over at the girl.

"That's about your height. Please, you're going to sing that Welsh song you sang the other night at the flat. I wanted you to sing it all over again as soon as you finished. You'll sing it again for me now."

She looked towards me. Then she got up. But she said, "I won't sing it, you know. Not that song. I don't think I'm ever going to sing . . . that song again."

Funny how I couldn't ask her why.

"Sing another song, then," I said.

She took the piano-stool; waited a moment. I'd forgotten I was standing about an inch off it and that nobody can sing with another person in their pocket.

So I stepped back and sat down on the arm of the easy chair behind her.

Then she brought her little hands down on the keys.

She gathered to her chords that reminded one at once of the harp for which they were composed. All Welsh airs have got that in common I suppose. Then she planed away into another of those wistful old tunes. Her voice was not as clear as it had been the other night, but sweet as the raindrops on the roses outside, sweeter for the tiny hesitation as she sang :

*"Farewell to thee, Wales ; farewell to thy mountains,
Thy streams that are crystal, thy woods that are wild."*

Something like that the words went, for I looked 'em up afterwards. This time, as she sang, I was not swept all those miles away to my island of palm trees and sparkling sands. This time I jolly well knew where I was—face to face with a lot of hard facts.

For this morning I'd got up never dreaming I'd set eyes on this girl again, except, perhaps, as Mrs. Slim Grantham. I'd been thrown into her company for the best part of a day, and she'd just taken my breath away by letting me know she wasn't going to be Mrs. Slim, at all, ever. And she'd meant that. I'd felt it in every tone of the voice that woke me, woke me now to the absolute foundations of me.

As she sang, I was so "awake" all over me that I seemed extra-conscious of everything about me. The dimly-green, flower-scented room ; the glimpse through the French* windows of glimmering pools, and a sudden gleam of sunshine after storm, falling bright as a shaft of jewels aslant the rhodos in bloom and the lemon-yellow azalea. The peace and freshness of the place I felt, threaded by her music as she sang to me, musing.

If she wasn't going to be Mrs. Slim and I certainly wasn't going to be "Mr. Phyllis" . . . No, I'd break off to-morrow. The way must be clear to my own girl.

Keenest of all I felt the utter sweetness of Her, sitting there singing to me again. My girl! My own sweetheart that I'd seen and that I'd known for mine all those ages ago! Sweet and adorable. I would have been in love with her now if I'd met her to-day for the first time; but how much sweeter and more adorable because of all those blank days when I gave up hope of seeing her for ever! . . . Once in fever after my wound I'd felt that every nerve in me was open, throbbing to the pain of my head. Now I felt that every nerve had been laid bare again and was again throbbing, but to the delight in my heart. Every line of her shapely little body, flowed over by the rosy folds of that dress, seemed to draw itself upon me. Every goldeny thread of her hair seemed to curl itself out and towards me, to weave itself around me, fetching me to her, fetching me.

I can't try to explain this. How would a needle start describing what it feels like to be well within the radius of the magnet? I suppose everybody does use that illustration. That's because it's the only one.

You know the prompt, fated little jump that needle gives when it up and flies to the current?

That was me. "D'you get me, Steve?"

What did I do about it? *This:*

Before I knew I was going to move, I was on my feet again. One stride across the floor and I was up to her. I bent over and did what I'd felt at that party I'd give my eyes to do then and there. As she

broke off on a note, I kissed the soft white nape of her neck just under her hair. I kissed her again on the lovely little bit of shoulder below.

I couldn't help it. . . .

No excuse. . . .

I just couldn't help it. . . .

Then without a pause I drew her up and into my arms and held her tight and kissed her close on the mouth. Hoarsely I said to her, "My little Lady! Mine. All mine. Aren't you?"

I held her, soft and warm and fluttering. I wanted to crush her all up, but I just held her, knowing enough to know that I must never let this wonder go whatever else happened. Her little face was all dazed. Her eyes, as if she'd been woken up by a raid. Not a word out of her. I held her, held her even when she tried to move.

"No. Ah, you can't go," I muttered, feeling I'd die if ever she did. "Never leave me after this; never!"

It was then she pressed her face into my shoulder. I heard her gasp, "Oh——" I'm almost sure I heard as well a softly-breathed "darling!"

As I told you, one can't snapshot the rainbow. Useless to try and give you what I felt, hearing this from her. Best I could get out in reply was an idiotic gruff, "Darling yourself!"

Then, as I stood there with her clasped against the buttons of my borrowed tunic, I started to pour it all out.

"Funny how I always knew—knew you were the one. All in that letter I wrote you. Yes, I did write once. Ages ago. . . . Burnt the letter. I did tell you how I cared. Had to speak to you; just had to.

Understand now, don't you?" Her little fingers tightened on my arm as I said it. "I say, you did understand the other night. I'd have given anything! . . . You belong to me. You see? You knew too. I did . . . first time I saw you in the street. You! Nobody but you, ever——"

Here she drew herself away a bit. I heard her say, huskily, something about "another girl, though——"

"No other girl on earth! None I've wanted. Only been engaged to one," I answered, a bit oddly, perhaps. "Can you understand? Engaged. That's nothing. If you only knew, darling, darling! This is everything," I told her, passionately wanting her to get the truth well into her head. "You're my girl. You can't get out of it. You're my only sweetheart——"

It was just here and now, of all times and places that a voice broke in. It came from behind us.

"Jack."

There stood the Blurter, tall and composed in her land kit.

Phyllis's sister. . . .

Lord!

I knew she must have seen, even as our arms dropped. She must have heard.

This lunatic house! Whoever built it could never have thought of making love to anybody in his life. All doors and windows. Walls the thickness of your finger-nail, and every word carrying.

She'd heard, of course.

"Jack," she said quietly, as I faced her like a fool, "can you spare me a moment? I'd like to tell you something."

Lord, yes. Now for the telling off. . . . Strafe for Phyllis's fiancé. What she thought of me.

. . . Caught out like this! Well, I deserved it. After my resolution not to say a word until my engagement to Phyllis was all off. . . . Fool I'd been! Couldn't help it; do it again. Still, with my little lady here, this was going to be the deuce and all——

But in a second Phyllis's sister reassured me.

"No, no, no," she said very quickly in answer to the look on my face, I suppose. "It's all right. I want to tell you, too"—this to my horror-stricken little lady. She took her by the arm. "Come and sit down here."

She led us to the Chesterfield in front of the fire and sat down between us.

"Now," she began, "nobody in my family ever said anything about this to you, Jack. They wanted it to die a natural death. They meant well. Half the misery in the world may be put down to these kind hearts who mean well," declared the Blurter, with her head well up. "I don't pretend to be kind-hearted, but I am about the only sincere woman I know. I don't mean I don't tell lies, after all one's living in this world at the moment. *But I do keep, in my own mind, the line distinct between 'what is' and 'what is supposed to be.'* That's why I feel the best plan is to tell you what they all implored me not to breathe to any living soul."

Still feeling more than sheepish, I asked, "What's that?"

CHAPTER XXXIII

STARTLERS

"Not ev'n the tenderest heart, and nearest our own
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh."
—Keble.

THE BOY'S STORY

SHE didn't answer at once.

She sat forward, took up the poker and turned a little log from its mossy side to the pink glowing side ; she watched the flames spring up. Then she sat back again, turned to me as I sat, tongue-tied and awkward, beside her, and asked, "Do you remember the last time you came down here to this house, Jack ?"

"Remember ? Rather !" And I thought I knew what our hostess would say next. I thought she'd remind me of how she'd said to me, all those Sundays ago, "*Come again ! . . . Even if you aren't with Phil, come here again !*" I'd come, as I'd already reminded myself, not only not with Phyllis, but bringing a totally different girl. Of course I was still supposed to be engaged to Phyllis. Was the Blurter going to start in and talk about this ?

But no. Her next remark was, "Do you remember how I asked about another man ? A friend of yours ?"

By Jove, yes. I did remember how I thought it odd at the time her asking me at once, "*And how is Mr. Grantham ?*"

I said now, "Yes, of course I remember." With a quick little dig of her heel into the hearthrug in front of her, the Blurter burst out softly, but in the most

viciously angry voice I'd ever heard from a woman's lips, "I can't tell you how I hate that friend of yours!"

"What, old Slim!" I exclaimed—then felt an idiot for saying the name before my little lady, who had opened her eyes wide. This was going to be awkward. Why had the Blurter dragged Slim in?

"Oh! I—he is a friend of mine," I said clumsily. "I'm sorry you don't like him, but——"

"Is one expected to like the man," she asked, still softly but furiously, "who jilted one's pet sister? Poor Phyllis adored the creature."

Here was a thunderbolt.

Slim? Jilt Phyllis? Phyllis? Adore Slim? Hadn't she told me herself—not only that she couldn't stand him, but that he'd "died" on her, that she was sick of the sight of him?

So I broke in, "Ah, that's a mistake. You're wrong, really. You're quite wrong. I ought to know if anybody does. Phyllis can't stand Slim Grantham."

Phyllis's sister demanded, "Did she tell you so?"

"Yes. A dozen times."

"Ah! If she'd told you once and then shut up about it, there might have been some truth in it. My dear young man, never believe anything a girl tells you a dozen times."

"Perhaps. . . . But if you happen to be engaged to the girl——"

"Pooh!" said the Blurter coolly. "I've been engaged myself, more than once. I told you I wasn't a truthful person, only sincere. Phyllis has lied to you and lied to you. She'd reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Well! One of them was her attack of influenza

last winter. At least we called it influenza. We let Phyllis think it had been influenza; new kind. But I tell you it was much more like brain-fever. And Mr. Grantham's fault; all his fault."

Rather bewildered, I muttered, "But anybody can have brain-fever!"

"I dare say they can, for all that young man cares. Scalps for him!" said she, vicious again. "That's his kind. Now listen, and I'll tell you about him."

But I interrupted her quickly—and it was my little lady, sitting there sweet and seriously attentive and surprised, that I was thinking about.

"I say, please wait one minute," I interrupted this Blurter before she could blurt out anything further. "I've got to stick up for Slim because he's a pal of mine; and Miss Parry knows him too, you know."

"Does she?" put in the Blurter with her quick look at my little lady. "Apparently Miss Parry was immune, though. . . . I'm not going to pretend I don't know about you two," she suddenly flashed out at us. "Of course I saw." Then, like a challenge, "You are playing straight, aren't you?"

I suppose she saw her answer in our faces, for she went right on:

"Then, of course, it means that you and Phil will break it off to-night?"

"Yes."

"Splendid," from the Blurter. "But even that doesn't mean that Mr. Grantham comes in anywhere——"

I looked at her; I urged, "When I tell you that Phyllis doesn't even like him—wouldn't have him as a gift——"

She put up her hand. "Wait. I didn't finish the

influenza story. Let's have that first. This feverish attack was why she had all her beautiful long hair cropped, you know. High fever for two nights she had, when she didn't know any of us. Not mother and father; not the twins; not me. There she lay, tossing from one side of her bed to the other, talking, talking. And all about what? Slim this! Slim that! Calling for Slim . . . crying for him. . . ."

I listened in blank amazement. Phyllis, that flippant modern Londoner, the type of whom my doctor-man had said that they had no hearts, only feet. Phyllis crying for a man!

"Slim never knew about that. That I'll swear," I began.

Our hostess cleared her throat and went on angrily. "It was pitiful! I couldn't let mother sit with her. She was too upset after one evening when Phil was raving about '*the funny little reasons why one goes mad about Slim.*' and the way he'd stroke her gloves down after he'd put them on for her."

"Ah!" I said suddenly. "Was *that* it?" For I'd remembered an odd little thing that had always puzzled me. That time in the train with Phyllis when she'd flamed out at me because I'd smoothed her glove. . . . For no reason, I'd thought. I saw it now. Nobody was to be allowed to do what Slim had done. Was that it?

The Blurter went on: "Every pretty thing Slim had ever said to her I had all night. Now, tell me what a 'thundering fine chap' he is, Jack. No, let me finish first. Of course when she got well she imagined nobody had suspected anything beyond one of her usual nonchalant breezy flirtations. And of course she did exactly what I expected that girl to do. She

plunged into an engagement with the first man who asked her. That happened to be you. Dead-sea apples for both of you. All her thoughts with the other. She imagined marriage would bury that. I knew it wouldn't. Never could. Never does! When she brought you down here I saw how it was turning out. You'd begun to bore each other to tearless racking sobs even then!"

Funny how grateful I felt to the Blurter for putting this into so many words for me while my little lady listened. But our hostess's thoughts were now tearing Slim to ribbons again.

"All play to him, a girl's heart broken and her life messed up by belonging to the wrong man," she said. "But you still think him 'a thundering fine chap,' don't you?"

"I think one thing. Slim never knew she thought of him that way," I repeated. "Certain of that."

"Well, I don't know or care what his side of it was. I only know how much he saw of my sister for a time. He was always at our house, taking her out. He made love to her—oh, up to a certain point. (Men think nothing counts as jilting but after an actual proposal.) Then he—rode away. He'd played with counters. Much he cared whether she'd staked gold and lost!"

Her bitterness took the wind out of my sails a bit. But I couldn't see old Slim as this villain of the piece. His image came up before me now, towering slenderly above the other fellows, fair head tilted, naughty smile in the eyes, air of gaiety and good-humour. Slim was all right. Always decent. Now that I knew he'd no shadow of chance with my own little girl, I'd no more wish for bombs to drop on him. He'd always been topping to me.

"You're hard on him," I said to Phyllis's sister as she set her mouth harder still. "Slim is——"

"Oh, a delightful character," she scoffed. "The 'chase-not-the-quarry' type of hunter; the type that never pays. That's left to poor Phil and her kind."

I said, "I don't think he's just that and nothing else. Slim's much too kind-hearted at bottom. Er—don't you think he is?"

I appealed to my little girl. (Funny and grotesque as it seems, I couldn't for the life of me at that moment remember her Christian name. After all, I hadn't often heard it. I'd never used it. All the time I'd known her I'd only called her "My little lady" and "Darling!")

Our hostess turned to her too. Quite abruptly and suddenly she asked: "Have you known him long? Are you, by any chance, the girl in yellow?"

"Yellow?" my little lady repeated. "But I never wear it!"

"Ah, then it wasn't you. No doubt Mr. Grantham has had a dozen attractions dressed in every colour of the rainbow since that one. But it seems to have been a girl in a yellow frock who attracted him away from Phyllis. She raved about that girl too. Engaged to a man in Shanghai, I believe," said our hostess, adding with a kind of blank smile on her face, "Engagements seem to allow for so many things nowadays!"

I knew what she was getting at, but whereas I didn't care a button, I believe my little lady minded a wee bit. She, my sweetheart, was free. But I wasn't officially, until I'd seen Phyllis and asked for my freedom. Officially we'd broken bounds. But I wasn't going to put up with any ragging about it with

my darling there. I sat up straight and turned the conversation right back.

"Look here," I said firmly to our hostess. "About Slim. You've had your say about the way he behaved to your sister and that. Will you let me put in a word for him now?"

"Will you promise not to say that he's a thundering fine chap?"

"Right. But I must say this. You are wrong about his not paying. You are wrong about his not feeling, taking everything as play. He isn't like that any more now. He does feel things. He—I'll tell you what he told me about only the other night when he came to my rooms." And I went on, describing that time when Slim came round to my place with the blue hump on him and had yarned away for hours about the man who is at first so popular with women, until they find him out as a philanderer. Fed to the teeth, Slim was, that night about the way things had gone with him lately; ready to chuck this chasing and steady down.

I told the Blurter all this, I didn't repeat, of course what he'd said about going to marry a quiet, little, Welsh girl who was so different from the others. (He'd want that forgotten, I knew). That I gave a miss, but nothing else. . . .

The Blurter listened, silent as anything, to every word I said.

I told her how Slim had complained that his number was up, and that in spite of all his "flames" who'd taken these violent fancies to him, there was not a girl among 'em on whom he could count for sympathy, or who could give him a particle of honest, genuine affection.

I stopped there.

The Blurter who had been taking in every syllable of this last, looked me straight in the eyes, asking, "He actually said all that?"

"All of it," I assured her. "And I'm sure of one thing. He never knew Phyllis had cared for him, like you've just said. I'm certain of that. He'd put it down as flirtation, Phyllis's amusing ways of talking, or something; well, you know Phyllis——"

"Yes. *You* don't," said Phyllis's sister, very thoughtfully, staring at the fire. "If Slim Grantham knew that Phyllis was eating her heart out for him, do you suppose it would make a difference to him?"

This struck me. "It must," I said. "Oh, I think it would."

She looked at me half doubtfully, "I wonder if you'd know. Supposing Slim knew the truth! You think that—if you weren't engaged to her, as you won't be to-night. I take it—Slim Grantham would be glad?"

It was here, for the first time since we'd been sitting in front of that fire that my little lady volunteered a remark on her own. "Slim would be glad," she said shyly, turning her pretty head. "I know he would be glad."

Funny how these half dozen words from some one of her own sex seemed to impress our hostess more than if I'd talked my head off. Quite eagerly now she asked, "*You* think so?"

"Yes. I'm quite sure," said my little girl simply. "This—this is what I think. What Slim wants now more than anything, is for some girl to love him like——"

She gave the tiniest glance towards my corner of

the sofa and ended, "some girl to love him better than anyone in the whole world; to love only him."

Our hostess sprang suddenly to her feet and drew a long breath, looking down at us.

"Well, much as I hate him for what he did," she cried, "I would like him to have his chance of that. For Phil's sake. Poor child! It's a perverted taste, but that's what she felt for him; feels for him still. What does it matter if he isn't worth it? What man is worth it? You smile, Miss Parry; you girls in love are all alike? The only difference is that some are happy and some aren't. Phil ought to be happy. She must! . . . When did he see her last, Jack?"

"I don't know. Not—no, not since she was engaged."

"Sure of that?"

"Quite."

"He hasn't been near the house, I suppose?"

"No, never," I said. "You see, I thought she wouldn't want him——"

"Did you. If only—but of course she's not even free yet. Now you will break it off directly, Jack, won't you?" urged my sister-in-law-never-to-be. "Of course you will. It's unthinkable to you too. I can see that. You will see her to-night. As soon as you get back? . . . But supposing by any chance she isn't there . . . Look here! Can't you ring her up from here and make sure of her? Tell her you must see her because you've got something important to speak to her about. That's the best plan. Telephone. Telephone now!"

I was in quite as much of a hurry to settle this as Phyllis's sister could wish. Off I went to the telephone, and quite promptly I was put through.

Then came the startler.

"Hullo," I called. "Is that Mr. Carteret's house?"

A voice that I knew as well as I knew my own called back. "Yes . . . Hel-lo! That *you*, old horse?"

Slim's voice from that house!

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BIRTHDAY

" My heart, my heart is like a rainbow shell
That swims upon a halcyon sea !
Because the birthday of my life has come."

—*Christina Rossetti.*

THE BOY'S STORY

WELL ! Of my journey back to town with the little girl I can't tell you anything, except that it was just a golden dream.

Seemed to make no difference that I'd got to see Phyllis Carteret at the end of it all, and that there was the deuce of an explanation to come at 99, where I'd said, by telephone, that I should turn up as soon as possible. That could wait. Made no difference, either, that we couldn't get a carriage to ourselves, but had to pack in with four Canadian officers from Bramshott on each side and two standing up. For, every now and again, I caught her sweet eyes and held them for just a moment. That was enough. The dream brooded over us. . . .

But no sooner had the train come to a stop at Waterloo platform than——

Now I've come to it I'm hanged if I know how to tell about the rest of that time.

Here goes for a start, though. .

It was a packed train, as I say ; crowds getting out on to the platform. Our carriage was half-way down the train. Funny how, even from that distance, I found my eyes turning at once to the barrier where they collect tickets and to the bunch of people waiting

to meet, their friends. It wasn't as if we expected anybody we knew.

But lo and behold! Over the heads of everybody else there I did catch sight of a well-known face. A fair, jester-like sort of face, rather pale, but fairly beaming with sheer joy and devilry. Eyes darting this way and that on the look-out for somebody. Just over his shoulder showed a cheeky hat and another pair of eyes, girl's eyes, also on the look-out.

At once I spotted them. Phyllis Carteret and Charles Wolfe—otherwise "Slim" Grantham. *To-gether!*

As Slim caught sight of us, out shot that long arm of his as if it was going to haul the pair of us straight through the gates. Before we got near, I heard his hail.

"Hi! Jack! Julia!" he shouted past the ticket-collector's ear. "Get a wiggle on! Taxi's waiting. Regular bodyguard o' boys round in case somebody pinched it. I know what taxi-thieves they are at this station——"

Everybody within hearing laughed.

"Hallo!" I began, all at sea as I came up. But already Slim had had the audacity to grab my little lady by the arm, and I was left to follow when I'd given up the tickets.

This, mind you—don't forget it!—was the Slim Grantham I'd been picturing, two hours ago, as a sort of broken-down penitent, ready to spend the rest of his days in sackcloth and ashes. Fed up with life, gloomy, conscience-stricken. I'd been sticking up for him, saying how he'd altered. Does anybody ever alter? . . .

It was half-way through the luggage-hall that I

caught up with the others. My precious penitent was making all the running. During the short passage from the barrier to the luggage-hall he'd managed to get the girls one on each arm and to be yapping to both of them at once. I came up in time to see them both lean forward across him at the same moment and to hear them both gasp out together, "Then it was *you*?"

"*You* were the girl who came into Cromwell Road that night," cried Phyllis.

And my sweetheart, "*You* were the girl sitting on the piano! Why, I knew the snap-shot——"

That's what I heard them say just before young Slim took boisterous command of the whole conversation again.

"Train's half an hour late again—what a line! *Jamais esprit*—never mind. I booked a table at the Croesus. New grill-room; table for four. Don't interrupt, you Jack. This is my birthday. I'm two. What d'you like to eat, Julia? 'Course your Grannie thinks you've been *avec* me all day; naughty, naughty girl. What'll we eat? Dashed if I care what I eat to-night. I just told old Sapristi, the head waiter, to feed us all he'd got and to keep some more by ready. Here you are you kids!" He spun out a handful of silver to the boys who'd mounted guard over the taxi. "Tell him the Croesus as quick as the engine'll run."

Off we buzzed, the four of us. . . .

I'm telling you what happened, mind, not the way any of us ought to have behaved. Here had I been spending a blissful day in the country with Slim's girl. There was he with my (still) fiancée on his arm, holding it as if she were afraid to let it go. . . . As the

taxi gambolled into York Road I saw him seize Phyllis's hand, without worrying to hide what he was doing, and hold it, cuddle it up against his coat, and, with his thumb, smooth down the seams of her glove.

Phyllis, her black eyes far, far away, didn't seem to be seeing us or him or anything. . . .

"Don't mind us," chuckled Slim, nodding at me, "I dare say you've been young, once!"

That was his start in. More coming. Much more. Still with his arm through Phyllis's and his hand in hers, he marched into the Croesus as though he had just bought it, threw his hat and stick into the little office, forgot to take the ticket and shoo'd the girls away to their cloak-room. When they'd gone I let myself be serious and looked at him for some sort of explanation of all this, while they were away.

Did I get it? No fear. He just dragged me to the buffet.

"Two sherries and angostura, Sybil?" he cried. "Pour the bitters in the glass and pour 'em out again. Not that sherry! You know the kind I like"—chucking down some more money. "Well!" He laughed over the top of his glass "Cheero, old horse!"

"Cheero," said I in a dazed voice. "I say——"

"Have another? No? Come right along then. There are the girls."

They were standing at the top of the stairs; Phyllis all vivid in a frock I'd never seen her wear before; colour of green Chartreuse. My little girl had taken off that hat that had got soaked in the thunderstorm and dried before the Blurter's fire. Her hair, under the clustered lights of the vestibule, was the realest gold anywhere near the place; her face was the

sweetest rose-and-cream against some soft black silk affair that she'd slipped on to wear over her jacket and skirt. I saw, presently, that this garment was Phyllis's evening wrap that she'd lent her to wear in the restaurant.

"Did you know they knew each other?" I managed to get out to Slim as we went downstairs to the grill.

"Knew each other?" he laughed. "All my girls have to know each other, I guess. Regular Bond of Union, I am. Only crab about me is that, long as I am, there's not quite enough of me to go round, so——"

"Yes, but look here. Seriously——"

"Seriously will do when we've had something to eat, old horse. That's all right. We'll have a little quiet explanation when we're at table; that's the scheme . . . Ah! This our table? Good. Now, Honey-love, you come and sit here——"

(This to Phyllis!)

"You two sit where you like. Good and close to the band, aren't we? We're going to have *Give me the Moonlight*, by request, in a minute."

Before we'd dipped our spoons into the soup, that band (we were practically sitting in the storm-centre of it, and it included five huge buck-niggers, a bass drum with cymbals, several brass tea-trays and an extra-powered motor horn) burst into the deafening racket through which we could hardly hear our own voices.

"Can't explain anything with all this going on, old horse," Slim bawled in my ear. "No *bon*. Unfortunate, isn't it? . . . Waiter; oh, yes . . . Say, what year will we drink?"

Was I dreaming, or did I hear my own little lady suggest, "Eighteen-sixty!" with a laugh in her eyes over some joyous little thought of her own. I couldn't ask her then what it was.

While that storm of music fairly raged about us we ate and drank. I don't know what. Slim knew I didn't. I heard him advising the waiter in a bellow to bring up any eats that everybody else was giving a miss, and crowd 'em upon *that* gentleman (me).

"All the left-overs from lunch. He'll take 'em like a lamb: never notice!" Slim grinned. "Bits of fat folks wouldn't eat——"

"Slim——!" protested Phyllis (delighted with him).

"Yes, on plates with splodges of old, dry mustard left sticking to 'em since Wednesday week—he'll never see. It's *his* birthday, too. Fill your glass up, old horse!"

Presently the buck-niggers ceased their uproar for the time being, but the applause from all over the restaurant made nearly as much noise. In the middle of the clapping and knife-tapping and shouts of "Encore," Slim leant confidentially forward. I thought now at last he was going to stop his nonsense and say something serious. He spoke seriously enough, but all he said was, "Maybe I haven't got much of an ear for music. But I do understand that band! I feel it, somehow. Way up here," he ran his hand up his spine. "It seems to kind of express my sentiments, to-night. D'you get me, Steve? Pity one can't let off a couple of Number 5 Mills' grenades into the middle of the fortissimo part, isn't it?"

And from the look on the ruffian's face I knew—I just knew that he meant to go on like this for the

rest of the evening, never bothering to explain any of it at all. Except what he must have already explained to Phyllis. I imagined he'd had some sort of a fateful talk with her at 99 that afternoon. . . . But to me he didn't attempt to—to——

Well, there I sat, aghast at the fellow's nerve. Ignoring all he'd ever confided in me that evening in my rooms! Washing out the way that he had (according to her sister) behaved to Phyllis in the past! Just butting in when he thought he would, to take possession again and monopolise the girl who was still my fiancée! Petting her hands; smiling into her eyes; calling her "Phil, darling," and keeping his boot firmly down on her smart shoes under the table! Telling me and my little lady we could go and sit on the chandelier if we liked! Making a regular festa to celebrate his outrageousness, a birthday dinner with fizz and the loudest jazz-din in London! He was the extreme and ultimate limit. . . .

At last there happened to come a quarter of a minute when he was not talking and the girls not helplessly laughing over him. I pulled myself together to seize the chance.

"Look here, Slim!" I managed to get in quite sharply. "You said you'd explain. I must say I should like to know what all this is about. To start with——"

Slim cocked his head to one side in that way he has, then turned a perfectly sincere stare upon me.

"What's what all about, old horse? Everything is all Potsdam fine, isn't it, folks? Everything just as right as it can be? I'm *très* happy: look at me. Phyllis is happy. Aren't you, Phil?"

Phyllis threw up her bobbed head and looked away from him. "No," she said, her eyes dancing.

"Ah, wait till I get you out to God's Own Country in a fortnight's time, I'll teach you not to be happy," Slim assured her. ("Oh, pardon me, Honey, did I walk on your toe?") Well now, see here. As I say, we're happy. And if you and Julia are miserable, I'm no judge of faces. Saw yours when you got off the car at Waterloo. Shining like the headlights of a high-power automobile. So what is there to explain?"

I began, "Then you and Phyllis——"

"Sure. That's all properly fixed up," said Slim, setting his jaw. "Nobody can alter that now. We fixed that up soon as ever I'd finished with old Snooky-dinkums on the old line. That's where I made a bee-line for 99. Phyllis's. To have something out that should have been out months ago, would have been if—if—well, we'll owe for 'ifs' now. I did you in, and I don't care if it snows a dazzling shade of pink. You aren't going to tell me it was any skunk's trick, are you, *vieux cheval*? You? With that face?"

He laughed again, stole Phyllis's roll, broke off bits of it, and went on, "Honest-to-God, though, about one thing. I did not fix it up deliberately for you and Julia—Bad Lass!—to elope into the country just so's I could get engaged to your fiancée in comfort and a clear conscience. Nay. That was just excellent staff-work on the part of my guardian-angel, I guess. Tell you what, Jack——"

But before he could tell me what, the buck-niggers had started in again.

Not worth while trying to talk down that assortment of musical instruments as per above!

I gave it up.

I gave up Slim, too.

Was he apologetic about the way these things had happened? Did he waste a thought on what other people might say of him? Did he care one brass farthing about anything on earth but this birthday celebration of his with the girl in green Chartreuse colour by his side and that hideous din that he called music deafening his ears and running in shocks up his spine? Not he. Nor would he let anybody else worry about it.

I sat back laughing resignedly, and looked at the girls.

My own little lady smiled at me with bewildered eyes. In that place of glitter and blare she was a wild rose set among parrot-tulips. It amused her for the time being, I knew; but this wasn't the sort of thing she'd ever care for. She let this racket rip around her—but I knew, I knew how in her heart she'd rather sit in a buttercup field alone with me. Simple things she liked; not this feverishness and noise and crowds in glad-rags and expensive glitter and constant excitement and jumping about from one amusement to something fresh!

The country-side; fresh air and quiet and space; flower-scent and old-fashioned tunes, and . . . just each other. That was enough for each of us, I knew. Deadly old-fash. the pair of us. Good. Splendid that we *were* a pair! I thought of my doctorman and of his talk of music that comes when lonely bass blends with the treble for which it was composed.

Horrible discords we'd made together, Phyllis and I! But even in the middle of my relief and happiness at being free, I could realise there'd be no discord between her and Slim Grantham. Another girl she

was, sitting there with him, a girl I hadn't known, would never have got to know. Bright as a butterfly, but without that restless, fidgetty brightness that used to rasp my nerves. She no longer glinted about all over the shop like a dancing reflection. She glowed like a rosy lamp. For the first time I saw that she was after all a jolly good-looking girl. Talk about black eyes being so hard. They always had been, to me. They were soft as velvet trimmed with stars as they turned to her Slim. . . .

Slim, in whom my girl saw nothing but a mad-cap!

How true, that remark of Mrs. Lou's (the first time I met her) on being attractive :

"To some you are, to some you aren't!"

To my late fiancée Slim Grantham was absolutely everything that I could never have hoped to be. There they sat happy as kings in this mob and glitter that they both love; suits them, they bloom in it! I can't imagine them except in the centre of "Something Doing"—they'll make their own "Cræsus" in Canada or in Kamschatka! Always Slim would have a roomful of people in gaudy bits of frocks to glance round as he, the pride of the Ritz-Carlton, carried on his back-chat turn with some indulgent head-waiter; always Phyllis would laugh from behind her characteristic entrenchment of cigarette-rings and Serenade scent and face-powder and lip-salve, still loving him with her eyes as she did now . . . worshipping him for "a tin god on skates," as he says. . . .

Biggest change about her this evening was the way in which she (the chatterbox, the flinger-about of wild remarks!) let Slim do all the talking.

And, by Jove, how he did talk! . . . I've given you

some faint impression of that Jazz-band we were sitting in the middle of. For two hours Slim beat that band !

But after all this, I musn't forget the most thoughtful act that came at the end of that delirious evening, and that it was Slim Grantham who had the consideration to think of it in time.

" Say, old horse," he grunted to me at the Cræsus glass doors as the commissionaire raced off in search of a cab, " I hate to butt in on newly-engaged folks. But you'll have to let me come along with you and little Miss Julia after we've dropped Phyllis at 99 I guess I'll have to make it O.K. for you with the old lady ; introduce you to Grannie, I mean. Don't forget you haven't met *her* yet ! '"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GARDEN—AND THE GATE

" Jack shall have Jill."

—*Shakespeare.*

THE GIRL'S STORY.

2

WHAT a contrast, between the rowdy restaurant evening which celebrated my unofficial engagement to my Silver Badger, and that peaceful country-garden afternoon which came just at the beginning of that engagement after it was officially announced three weeks later !

This was in " The Blurter's " Surrey garden, also a contrast from that garden as I'd seen it last in a thunderstorm. Now, under the early-June sunshine, the rhododendrons were a mass of blossom, mauve, crimson, and rose ; gay as any in my home-county of Carnarvonshire ! Beside the flaming yellow azaleas a coral-red one glowed over its reflection in the trout pools. Sabres of iris fringed those pools, with a bright jungle of ragged-robin, tall buttercups, columbine and forget-me-not. The trees just rang with the singing of a thousand birds ; every now and then one caught the whirr of wings, and cuckoos called from field to distant field. That little waterfall into the pool on the left made a musical gurgling, and in and out among the bulrushes a moorhen paddled with her fluffy black brood. Oh, but it was peaceful, peaceful. . . . The two little boys had left us (at last) and were stalking

each other with bows and arrows in the paddock beyond the pools; and our hostess, slipping a skirt on over those land-girl legs of hers, had gone into the village to shop for our supper. As the scent of the sun-warmed roses drifted down from the verandah pillars, down the grass slope, towards the largest of the pools where the punt in which we idled floated close beside the bank, a quick splash as one of the trout leapt to a fly was the only sound to break the perfect calm of the place and time.

You can imagine if this was lovely to me after town traffic and pavements. It would have been sweet, even if I had been all alone. But now, imagine, drinking in all this loveliness and sweetness and peace beside one's own dear boy. . . . He, who has turned a dreary, navy-blue sort of world into a world of rose-colour and gold for me, was lounging at the bottom of the punt with his coat off and his head in my lap. My fingers—one wearing his signet-ring—strayed in his thick hair. I love his hair. I adore the silky sweep-back of it from his forehead and the sturdy short crop of it, like moss, at the back of his head. I love to touch it. Sometimes when he's asked me how I can possibly care for him, I've told him it's because of the way his hair grows.

Is this abject nonsense?

Or is it just as sensible as any other reason for loving her man that could be given by a girl in love?

He had been leaning back silently, only nestling his head against my fingers, for some minutes. Suddenly he threw his head further back and looked straight up into my eyes, and I saw that his own eyes

were clouded over some thought. Almost angrily, frowning, he spoke.

"Darling, d'you realise something?"

"What, Jack?"

"Have you thought," he asked me abruptly, "how very nearly we were not sitting here at all together?"

"Not sitting here?"

"Not here; not anywhere. Not together," he said with a grim set to the chin with a little wound-cleft. "Not me with you, nor you with me. 'D'you get me, Steve,' as Slim would say?"

"You mean if it hadn't been for Slim we might never have met each other?"

"If it hadn't been for the whole chapter of accidents and coincidences, I might never have had the chance of you," he said, still quite grimly. "Just think. Of you, who were made to belong to me; you who 'go' with everything I think and want like a tune to the right words. *You, who just simply are my girl. Who made allowances for, that? Who would have believed me if I'd tried to explain? You were just a pretty face."

"Oh, Jack, you do think I'm pretty?"

"A lovely girl's face seen in the street off the Bayswater Road every morning under a little coloured hat; that's all I was supposed to know of you. And to you I was just a man who passed. It didn't matter that we both knew better; *knew*. You couldn't do anything because of the dead-weight of all the—the world's grannies upon you. No; not even when I made that start. I was just trying to push in a stone wall—specially built up, I suppose, against all the blighters who *might* behave like cads to a girl like

you. No one to explain that I wasn't just one of those."

"But that's all come right now," said I, stroking his hair. "Why is it men will worry so dreadfully about things that are all over? Perhaps girls worry worse at the time. . . ."

"It's now that it's over and 'come right' that I see how very easily it might have stayed all wrong," he told me, staring away across those wavy green-and-rose reflections in the pool. "We might have spent our lives with people who jarred on us and warped us; we might have. . . . Why, supposing I hadn't been a pal of Slim Grantham's at all. . . . Supposing it hadn't been Slim who picked up your Grannie that day. . . . Suppose your Grannie hadn't taken such a fancy to the fellow that she didn't mind letting you go about with him. . . . Supposing he hadn't been called off that day when he—he, not me!—should have brought you down for that walk here. . . . Supposing I hadn't looked in at the office just at that moment when it happened that he could send me off on a message to you. Supposing there hadn't been that party at Mrs. Lou's, the Sunday before, when I was introduced to you? Supposing you'd married that old Welshman of yours? You might have. Yes! He might have coaxed and argued you into it. Or supposing you had got fixed up with Slim. *He* was keen, before he whisked back again to Phyllis. And your Grannie will always like him miles better than me!"

This is quite true; I'm sorry to say that poor Grannie just makes the best of my "terribly imprudent engagement" to "this friend of dear Mr. Slim's!" I often catch her murmuring about the

possibility of my changing my mind again! Too much to expect that the choice of one's heart should be the choice of one's relations' hearts as well. One can't have everything in this world!

My Silver Badger went on, "And I, as near as dash-it, married the wrong girl myself. Seems to me there was only a toss-up between *this*"—he cuddled his cheek against my lap—"and being unhappy ever after!"

"But we're happy?"

"Are you?"

"Are you?" I laughed.

"Ah," he said, with a long breath. Then "Funny how——" he shook his head, solemn again.

I love that little puzzled way he always begins "*Funny how!*" It just brings a lump into my throat. I asked, "What's funny now?"

"Funny how coming into a bit of thundering good luck like this oneself makes one realise the crowds of other poor devils who haven't been so lucky. *We've met*. What about those others though? *We're together* in a topping garden like this," he sniffed luxuriously at a waft of spicy azalea scent, "but they are shut outside the gate, sort of. Plenty of people who might be sweethearts and just don't know each other. Crowds of lonely fellows in the same boat as I was, I dare say. Never meeting the right kind of girls. Working all day, and at night going back to lonely digs—or worse."

He made a quick little snatch at my hand, the one that wasn't petting his hair, and held it as if, letting it go, he'd fall out of that punt and drown in that pool.

"Pretty hard," he muttered, "for a single fellow

to keep the ideal of something always in front of his eyes so that he turns down anything else until he's got it. Especially when it looks dashed likely that he never will get it. Not a woman to care a rap. Nothing to make him feel anything's worth while. Loneliness like that is the deuce. It's worse for men, of course."

"Oh, is it!" I cried, shaking my head at him. "It's easier for a lonely man, if he wants to get out and get to know people, to—to just *do* it. Somehow he'll find friends to take him to other friends. Men can do these things. People always welcome another young man to their homes, Jack, when they don't want to be bothered with another strange girl, who is perhaps dull and unamusing-looking just because she hasn't got a young man of her own. Think of the thousands of those girls!"

And there came back to me the heart-breaking little vision that I'd had in the Park that evening before I first met Phyllis Carteret. The vision of the unloved lovers of the world; sweethearts unmet. Only this time the far-reaching crowd of wistful faces had all the eyes of girls and the place in which they found themselves was not that vast garden made of all the pleasure grounds of Europe and America. . . . It was a great room made up of all the rooms in all the manless homes of all the towns where girls secretly fret and pine. I saw them sitting writing . . . (letters to other girls) . . . and reading (love stories about other girls, of course) and sewing (perhaps other girls' trousseau-things), all, in their hearts, so restless, so resentful, so unblest!

I sighed, "Oh, Jack, darling, it's worse for the girls. Or is it because I'm a girl myself that I know how they feel?"

He didn't answer my question. He said, very softly now, "Funny how I can only think of you, now, by the very first name I ever did think of you by. 'Jill,' I called you." He shifted up in the punt, until his head, that had rested in my lap, now snuggled into my neck.

Ever so gently, he kissed it. A necklace of thrills. Oh, what I can't understand is how Phyllis ever, ever let him go! After he'd kissed her! . . . But one is a different person with different people. Slim Grant-ham, now, had thought me a Rose-in-ice; a girl who takes and takes attention, admiration, love, but who has no longing to give anything of herself in return. How dreadful to be made like that! I could cry with pity for those girls. To my lover I felt I should always want to give, give, give everything that there was of me, that the giving would be joy, and that the more I gave, the more would be left me to give him, since he had given me all.

Desperately, passionately, he whispered, "I should never have *lived* if I'd never held you like this, Jill!"

"Jack! But we had to meet," I whispered back. "It couldn't be an accident. Not Chance. It must be Fate. Think, we'd nearly met before. I only just missed that party, and that class where you would have been. The next time came off. The chance has to come sooner or later when sweethearts like you and me have *seen* each other. It's bound to come."

He lifted his head from my throat. "Is it bound to come?" he muttered at my lips. "No, it's only a bit of luck, I think; that I'm able to take—this"—he kissed me; deep. "What luck, I say, *what* luck!"

"Fate!" I tried to protest, all trembling from him.
 "Bound to come!"

"No, it wasn't. Anyhow, kiss me. *You* never do kiss me."

"*Oh!*"

"Kiss me now, then," he coaxed. The sound of the gong rumbled softly down from the house. "Will you? U'm?"

"Then say it *was*, first."

"Was what, sweetheart?"

"Fate that we met," I prompted. "Bound to be."

"Fate, then!" he retorted, so close to me that I couldn't look at him, even if I hadn't had to shut my eyes as he says "funny how" I always find them shutting when I am in his arms. "Fate, Jill." My kiss met his kisses, but he added obstinately, "and luck!"

"That's not fair," I cried. "I shall always say——"

"That it wasn't luck?" he laughed joyously.

"No, but it *was* Fate," I had the last word just before those two little boys ran up along the bank shouting for us to come in to supper. "And that it *was* bound to be!"

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AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT.

May I be allowed a further "last word"? It will be made of questions, I'm afraid.

Are sweethearts so certainly "bound to meet" or are they not? Was the girl right? Or the boy? Is there a cherub with Cupid-wings sitting up aloft

keeping watch over such as they? Or is it all a toss-up; blind Chance, with *no one* to know, or care?

I don't know; but, personally, I care.

To me it seems to *matter* what happens to the love-lines of these straight-limbed lonely lads, of these nice and unfriended girls who should be their mates. The State is as anxiously watchful as any Grannie in the world that there should be "education" for every Jack and every Jill. Why is the education that comes from mere books considered vital, and not the irreplaceable education given by Love? The world could do without our scholarship-holders; but why must it remain poorer of healthy, delightful babies that could be born of all these love-matches that are never made?

The working-class mates as a matter-of-course. So does the leisured class. But the sturdy, well-derived middle-classes are still full of youth wasted, emotion unused, force lost to the world.

What can be done about this?

Once I cherished a dream of finding the answer. I dreamt that State centres for lonely young people of the so-called better classes should be started, a social hall in every village, a score to a hundred in every big town. I dreamt that the Jacks at a loose end and the Jills who knew no young men could go there as a matter-of-course instead of "sticking" at home or roaming the unprotected streets. I dreamt that these boys and girls could meet "on the square," and as if it were in one big family circle, with the

influences of home about them, and, over all, that care which is like no other, the care of a mother. They were not to be let in at haphazard, these candidates for companionship and love. Each was to pass before the Selection Committee of the place in which he or she found himself. I dreamt that this could be composed of three persons who in their three separate characters should be supposed to have insight into the natures and needs of young people.

The first should be a Doctor.

The second I had thought of as a Chaplain, preferably one who had served with the Forces during the war. It was a young soldier who pointed out to me that any good regimental officer who had understood and had been beloved by his men would do as well.

The third was to be a Woman ; happily married.

Then I thought it over and doubted again. For the weak point of this scheme for a League of Lovers is summed up in one word. *Who?* Who was to be that doctor on each committee, who that leader, who that motherly woman of the world? One knows how posts of this kind would get filled. By the pushful, the thick-skinned, the man out for a salaried job, the woman out for social notoriety.

The proper people for such posts would be crowded out by reason of the very qualities most required ; delicacy, tact, sympathy, reticence, the loving power of gleaning a young heart's secret and keeping it as a trust not to be betrayed.

Instead, in would come the official with his card-indexes, his filing-clerk to turn up tabulated emotions at the turn of a bell. In would come questions of salary, routine, departmentalism cut-and-dried. . . .

Inside would be these complacent officials. And outside in the cold would remain our sensitive lonely lads and girls, the sweethearts still unmet.

So much for that dream.

Some people who are greater believers than I am in the Power of Ink think that this thing may be done by correspondence. They, apparently, would take the risks of introducing by letter, young men whom they had never seen, to young women of whom they had never heard in their lives before. But what is that but the matrimonial bureau, in spite of which these problems are still here to depress one ? . . .

Their only reform is left—as with most reforms—to Private Effort.

There have always been people who care about the happiness of their very young friends. These know that happiness for such does not mean material comforts or “education,” but simply the Chance of Love ; for the girls, young men to meet—for the young men, nice girls. It seems simple enough, to these people. With a youngster to entertain, they inevitably ask themselves, “ What girls would he like asked ? ” For the girl-visitor they choose the nicest young men they know to meet her as naturally as they put flowers in her room. No deliberate match-making in these, but the principle realised that youth must be given the opportunity to pick and choose among his kind, her kind ; and that it is idiocy to take thought for the

proper unbringing and dieting and clothing and exercising of our growing race, and no thought for this other. These people are kindhearted—and realise.

Plenty of other people are kindhearted enough, but they do not realise. Middle-aged, the loneliness of early youth has been forgotten by them; married, their problems are settled, and they have the comfortable idea that "the boys and girls are all right, they will fend for themselves." So, comfortable homes are still populated by "Jills," who never see any men-friends; offices are even now full of "Jacks" who never get asked to these houses. (No wonder there's a rush for the Colonies by those with any chance of escape.) Air and water are recognised as essential to these boys and girls; the love that is no less essential is not only not recognised, not directed, but it is made of far less importance than the amateur photography or the bazaar-work with which they are allowed to fill hungry hours! They—the young torch-bearers of our Race—are not asked what they think about all this. By word and attitude of mind in their elders they are discouraged from discussing it—the girl is thrown inwards upon her brooding, the boy flung outwards upon companionship that disillusion, hardens, sickens.

Is this right?

No, since it cannot be that people are crassly cruel enough to wish all this to continue, it must be only want of thought that causes it.*

If each family were made a centre where "the boys could get 'the odd drink' at home" in the way of girl-companionship, and where every girl who came would be sure of finding sympathy on this subject of the love-interest (instead of merely small-talk about

the weather, the theatre, and how her mother was) it would soon begin to make a difference, not only to those particular boys and girls who went to that house, not only to those individual hosts and hostesses.

Individuals, when there are enough of them, influence thought. Cannot each thinking individual set himself "dead against" taking as a matter of course the really dire and hideous possibility of youth never meeting a suitable sweetheart? Let each in his thought give this matter the importance that it deserves. Those who fervently "think" a conviction come to "living" that conviction. Thought spreads; it spreads!

Let us in Heaven's name spread this thought among the worthy, the orthodox, the well-meaning-but-unthinking human beings who seem to have forgotten the message (quite simple and *hardly* new) that "male and female created He them."

THE END

